Mega Loops

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The Mega Man universe is entering the Infinite Loops, but there's a few problems...

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Primary Anchor Candidate

Disclaimer: Mega Man does not belong to me. Also, the Infinite Loops as a whole aren't my idea. They were started by Innortal and later codified by Saphroneth, this is just my personal jump into what has become a reasonably large fanfiction community with something resembling shared continuity.

Loop mechanics (general):

One person in a Loop, often the main character, is an Anchor. They are the person who first starts time looping.

There is always at least one Anchor present in a given Time Loop snippet, though it may not be the local one.

The standard pattern for a loop is that the Anchor (and whoever else is Looping there) come to awareness in a loop at a particular point in the story. From there, events will play out as influenced by the Loopers present, acting with the benefit of their foreknowledge, until either a predetermined end point is reached or all the Loopers have copped it.

To be Awake is to be aware of the time loops (that is, to have gone back in time *this* time.)

The Anchor is the only character guaranteed to be Awake. Even after others have started looping, it is mostly random as to whether they will be Awake this particular loop.

Crossovers, fusions, and alternate pasts can also take place. It is perfectly possible, for example, to have the characters Awaken into a loop which conforms to a fanfic universe rather than reality.

Loops do not have to be in chronological order, but it is strongly preferred that they not require a mutually contradictory order (where

A must be before B *and* B must be before A.)

Just about every Looper is very, very stir crazy.

Tvtropes Page: tvtropes. o r g (slash) pmwiki/ pmwiki . php/ Fanfic/ TheInfiniteLoops

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Backstory: The Loops began as a last-ditch failsafe when an event of unknown origin, even to the gods, hit Yggdrasil, the world tree and divine computer that runs all of reality. And while the admins do their best to repair something that has never needed this level of repair before, Yggdrasil's depleted resources try to hold back the proliferation of bugs, malware, and even eldritch reality viruses that were formerly contained by the healthy system. But... Not every Loop was hit equally by this event. Some, like Eiken, managed to escape damage to the point where they do not require an Anchor to keep running. Others... others were hit even harder than most and suffered more damage as a result. In these more damaged Loops the rules that govern them are affected by data corruption, resulting in bizarre circumstances that sometimes do not exist elsewhere.

And the branch of Yggdrasil containing the Mega Man multiverse was hit harder than any other known Loop.

Attempting Loop Activation:

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 1 using primary Anchor candidate:

Rock shook his head as he suddenly experienced a glut of memory errors. Entire years worth. Just like...

No, he'd never experienced something like this before... Why would he think he had?

It didn't matter. Dr. Wily had stolen Dr. Light's robot masters and attacked the city. Since he had been about the only thing outside Wily's control, he'd volunteered to be converted into a fighting robot and stop the mad doctor's plans. And possibly get him psychiatric help once he captured him.

The gate in front of him slid up and he beheld his opponent.

"Took you long enough," the orange robot master glared. "I thought you might have chickened out. But the Glue Gun of Bond Man will make certain you stick around... forever!"

Bond Man? No, that wasn't right... It was supposed to be 71#3 # &*$ #!%^...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 2 using primary Anchor candidate:

Rock still hadn't figured out what was up with his memory banks. He seemed to have spontaneously gained at least one redundant copy of events prior to actually living them, except it had been hopelessly corrupted and unreliable. After all, Dr. Wily had used a space station rather than the garish castle his false memories suggested. And for whatever reason, those memories were locked out from being overwritten.

Very odd.

But Rock's memory problems didn't change the fact that he needed to free the Chronos Institute from Dr. Wily's control.

"Well, look who decided to show up!" his own voice came from behind him.

Whirling around, Rock came face to face with... Copy Robot? Where was Qu!|\|7?VFRF[}%...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 3 using primary Anchor candidate:

Rock honestly felt like the universe was off somehow. In addition to what might have been multiple sets of corrupted memories of events he both had and hadn't lived, all of the robot masters seemed to be musically inclined.

Sure, the instrumentals were catchy and the songs were quite good, but the whole practice just seemed somehow... wrong.

Like what he was hearing as he climbed towards his confrontation with Gamma.

Gamma, stand for you are now unchained (You are now unchained)

You'll bring peace to our world gone insane

Restoring your freedom to make you whole (You are now unchained)

I'll give you power, you'll take control

All systems online

g:\GAMMA\sys/activation

g:\[peacekeeping]/calculation…

g:\…[solution\extermin 7!0|\|%$W6% 8...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 4 using primary Anchor candidate:

Rock had no time for this. He didn't know how he had memories of fighting this giant crane game reject when he'd never encountered it before, but he really didn't care so long as they helped him finish this quickly.

Severing the thick cable holding the machine up, he rode it to the ground and ripped off the canopy, only to freeze at the sight of the occupant.

"Kalinka?!" he stared incredulously at the young girl, looking like she hadn't slept or bathed in days. "Where's Dr. Cos$ [|#?#$%^ ...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 5 using primary Anchor candidate:

Rock had no idea what to think. Everything seemed to be going along according to the partial memory errors he'd received, except that he was a character in a video game. And apparently aware of it. Then some kid left his system on and, impossibly, Dr. Wily escaped into the outer world and Rock followed. Then Dr. Wily somehow caused a bunch of smaller robots to coalesce into a giant robot master-type thing.

Then things got weird.

"Because I..." declared Dr. Wily dramatically, throwing off his labcoat and revealing a dark-colored gi with mesh underneath, "...am a ninja!"

Seriously... What the heck was g01|\|&}nftwG%$Ydft4s5#$^...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 6 using primary Anchor candidate:

Rock was rather enjoying the World Robot Tournament. Sure, fellow robot masters were fighting, but it wasn't with him or to the death. It was, all things considered, a welcome change.

Even if those weird memory errors of his insisted the semi-finalists were supposed to be different.

"The first of eight semi-finalists!" the announcer boomed. "Built by the Comic Irregulars of Australia!"

"CHEDDAR MONK!"

The crowd roared with approval as the robed robot lifted its orange beam saber in70 743 A!&EVy6f4y6er^V&^9*t...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 7 using primary Anchor candidate:

"Watch out," Rock told his partner. "There's no telling what Dr. Wily's newest robot will try to pull."

"Understood," Tempo replied as he opened the door.

Rock silently counted his blessings that Tempo had started to help him in his fight against Dr. Wily since they met at the expo – even if the 'hints' his sister kept dropping that they should be a couple tended to be fairly annoying. Taking on the various threats that just seemed to keep cropping up without her help would have been a great deal harder. He knew this for a fact since he seemed to have partial memory errors of another life where he'd done just that.

Of course, the robot they were about to face rather flew in the face of those strange false memories himself.

"Well, well," growled the bipedal wolf robot Treble. "If it isn't the dynamic duo." At Treble's side sneered his animalistic and strangely quadrupedal humanoid companion Bass. "I suppose we'll have to put those new upgrades to the test. Come on Bass!"

Treble and Bass leaped into the air, glowing with energy as they began their combining sequence...

...and reality froze.

'What?' Rock thought to himself in confusion. Treble and Bass simply hung in midair, completely frozen. Rock himself couldn't seem to move either. *'What's happen!*|\|*&vve676v$%32% c24...*

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 8 using primary Anchor candidate:

"MWA HA HA HA HA HA HA! PEOPLE OF THE WORLD BEHOLD! I know it may be a bit sudden, but I hereby announce the commencement of my eighth plot to take over the world!" the sunglasses-wearing Dr. Wily declared over the pirated television broadcast, revealing his newest line of robot masters.

The entire world stared united in stupefied silence.

"Using the power of interpretive dance!"

Rock tried to reboot his neural net. *'What is this... I don'7 3^3*|\|*...*

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 9 using primary Anchor candidate:

Rock was wary. He had woken up one day with a slew of memory errors depicting multiple separate lives that he'd apparently already lived. The ones that seemed the oldest, if such a concept could truly be applied to them, got rather corrupted towards the end before becoming completely unreadable, but he had a feeling they were somehow important.

The others were a combination of similar or odd variations of the original up to a point where something incredibly strange happened and the universe just... crashed. Like a computer running a faulty program.

The events happened later and later, one for each set of robot masters Dr. Wily had used. As he was currently dealing with the ninth set of robot masters, Rock was on edge, just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And as he entered the area where Fake Man should be, he knew that it was about to happen. Because instead of Fake Man, there was a bound Dr. Light in the room.

Rock was prepared for just about anything, up to and including the whole room suddenly turning into a three-ring circus where clown cars tried to run him over. Thus he was rather stunned when he managed to cross the room and start to free Dr. Light without incident.

"Are you okay Dr. Light?" he asked his creator, still frantically scanning the room for anything weird.

"Oh, I'm just fine," the doctor said in a voice that very clearly wasn't that of Dr. Light.

Rock's jumpiness was all that managed to save him. He was so keyed up that he backed off as fast as possible at the first un-Dr.

Light sound out of the impostor's mouth and just barely managed to avoid a Metal Blade that would have taken his head off. He stared as the impostor peeled off Dr. Light's face to reveal the face of a robot he was quite familiar with.

"Old Doc Robot's just PEACHY!" the skull-faced multi-weapon robot master yelled as he attacked.

In a way, Rock was kind of relieved. Now that the bizarre event was out of the way, he could focus on finding the real Dr. L![]-+\=}"/...

ATTEMPT FAILED

PRIMARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE DEEMED UNVIABLE DUE TO SUCCESSIVE FAILURES

ADDITIONAL PRIMARY ANCHOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY UNRECOVERABLE

PROCEEDING TO SECONDARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE

Attempt 1) Bond Man was actually intended to be included in the original Mega Man, but they cut the number of robot masters in the game down to six before the eighth could even be designed.

Attempt 2) I actually like the idea of Quint. He was a very poorly handled character in my opinion. Personally, I think he's yet another clone of Rock using futuristic technology programmed to think he's the real thing. It's not like Wily hasn't proven to be more capable of that than kidnapping and reprogramming Mega Man or anything...

Attempt 3) The Megas rock. That is all.

Attempt 4) I'm just as confused as Rock is. I swear, this stuff comes out of my brain without consulting me first.

Attempt 5) *Megaman: Upon A Star* . I share Rock's opinion of the events depicted. And they go *exactly* like that in the material referenced.

Attempt 6) So... I *may* be a fan of the *Darths and Droids* webcomic...

Attempt 7) Tempo/Quake Woman is one of the original characters from the Archie comics. She's also one of the few female robot masters around, and the only one so far not made by Dr. Light, so Roll tends to be Shipper On Deck for Tempo and Rock.

Also a fatal reality glitch seems to have occurred with Treble and Bass.

Attempt 8) Gigamix (the best of the Megaman mangas in my opinion) Wily to start with (and he looks damn cool in those shades of his). Though he certainly took a turn for the bizarre there. Can you imagine Frost Man trying to do ballet?

Attempt 9) Rock is remembering the failed Loop activation attempts. *This shouldn't be possible.*

Secondary Anchor Candidate

Special Loop Terms:

Branch - A multiversal section of Yggdrasil comprising a universal baseline and all of it's myriad 'branching' variants. Can also be known as a 'Loop' when the term is referring to a location. They are so termed because Yggdrasil is frequently referred to as a tree. The Megaverse and all variations thereof comprise one such branch.

Loop Aware - To be aware that time is looping (without needing help) but not remembering past Loops

Dreaming - The ability to recall memories from past Loops without actually being Awake. Powers and physical skills are not retained. Extremely rare.

Malicious Looping Entity (MLE) - Anchors and loopers are meant to increase the stability of their branch of Yggdrasil so it doesn't collapse into nonexistence while repairs are affected. MLEs... essentially do the opposite. Extremely nasty and thankfully extremely rare. Most branches don't even have *one* .

Attempting Loop Activation:

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 1 using secondary Anchor candidate:

Roll blinked as her memory banks glitched.

Looking down at herself, she suddenly wondered if she'd always been this tall. Or had been such a mature-appearing model. The yellow bodysuit with the red stripes on the side certainly didn't seem familiar to her...

She really didn't remember getting into a fight with a buff-looking Cut Man.

She dodged a rolling cutter narrowly and pointed her arm at Cut Man, feeling it reform like her brother's often did – when did Dr. Light install that on her? – into... a toaster?

What good was a toa$73R/$%&^$Fg5ev6&^]...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 2 using secondary Anchor candidate:

Roll hated her life.

To start, she had fragmented and corrupted memories of at least one timeline that really didn't match the one she was living, reality couldn't seem to make up its mind about what was really going on, she was anatomically correct (which felt extremely weird to her despite the fact that her clearest memories insisted she'd always been this way), and her clothes kept getting destroyed for the most ridiculous reasons.

'I swear,' she thought angrily to herself, *'if something stupid disintegrates my clothes one more time, !'11...*

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 3 using secondary Anchor candidate:

Roll reflected that the oddest things tended to cross one's mind during times of peril.

She could have been reflecting on the fact that she had a glut of unexplained memory errors showing a completely different life – or was it several different lives? – she'd led.

She could wonder why Dr. Light apparently seemed to be based in Hawaii rather than this 'Mega City' she recalled from the other lives.

She might possibly wonder why she was programmed for polynesian cultural preservation in addition to the housekeeping duties her base design was meant for.

A question more pertinent to her current predicament was why, during his tenth attempt at global domination, Dr. Wily was using the Genesis Unit – Buster Rod G, Mega Water S, and Hyper Storm H, – to support his robot masters instead of a trio of robots her memory errors told her were called Enker, Punk, and Ballade – the Mega Man Killers?

An even better question would be why they had kidnapped her to set a trap for her brother when her memory errors insisted she should be sick with something called Roboenza instead.

However, what Roll really wanted to know all of a sudden was why she'd spent her life dressed as a hula girl complete with grass skirt.

Of course, Tempo seemed to dress the same way for equally unapparent reasons and her brother seemed much more interested in her than her memory errors indicated he would have been, so in the end it wasn't that bad she supp0$3|)^V%W^WY%%$GHYFg6yer...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 4 using secondary Anchor candidate:

Roll did her best to remain focused as she fought one of Dr. Wily's latest robot masters. Her brother had managed to do it, and she refused to dishonor him by failing to do the same. But that day haunted her incessantly.

Rock had gone off to Dr. Wily's latest space station to capture the madman and put an end to his latest reign of terror. He'd done it more than once already, and there was no reason to believe he wouldn't do it again.

So the whole world was understandably shocked when Dr. Wily appeared on every channel laughing victoriously.

Beside him was her brother.

More specifically, what was left of him.

Dr. Wily had apparently decided to indulge in a barbaric practice and mount her brother's head on a pike.

Consumed by sorrow and rage, she'd insisted that her father make her into a fighting robot like her brother had become so she could carry on his work. It was a testament to how affected Dr. Light was himself that he didn't even raise a complaint. He'd just wordlessly and mechanically done exactly as she asked, and more. She'd been outfitted with some experimental upgrades that allowed her to combine with Tango – the only surviving animal companion left – and the moment she'd seen the claws at the ends of her fingers that first time using the 'super adapter', she'd known exactly what she would do with them.

Roll had descended on the armies of Dr. Wily like the wrath of god, carving her way through his forces with a ferocity that a force of nature would have approved of. But he'd escaped then. Roll vowed he wouldn't do so again.

She was determined to catch Dr. Wily for real this time. But she wasn't going to hand him over to the authorities.

No, she was going to straight up k!11
4!|\/|VU&BB&^$F{}|543f65$%2$#**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 5 using secondary Anchor candidate:

Roll was a little jealous of her brother for something that could not possibly be his fault. The reason was that she'd gotten a slew of memory errors about a lifetime where he was the hero instead of her, and during this lifetime he had to deal with a radical pro-human terrorist movement known as the Emerald Spears led by Xander Payne.

Her? She had to deal with a fanatical robot-worshipping cult lead by a nutjob named Reverend Samuel Tiberius Dark. She'd have traded him for Xander Payne in an instant.

Aside from the unfortunate initials which must have made his school life hell, the man preached that the fate of humanity was to submit to robot rule and the only salvation for humans was to become robots themselves. He'd come up with a perversion of the 'three laws' as the central tenets of the religion. 'A human may not harm a robot'. 'A human must obey the commands of a robot'. 'Humans may not preserve their existence at the expense of robots'. The man believed that Dr. Wily was some kind of messiah, Dr. Light was the devil incarnate, and that she and her brother were traitors to their divine race for daring to defend the lives of humans.

And her other brother? Blues apparently had been sucked in by the cultist propaganda since he was leading the latest revolution in their name.

She dueled her older brother, trying to find something that indicated he wasn't doing this of his own volition when Blues what shot... by Blues.

Roll stared in confusion at two of her brother when the image of the first, her opponent, wavered and then dropped entirely to reveal a completely different robot.

An impostor.

Using her older brother's image to give the cult a semblance of credibility.

To say Roll was livid would be an understatement.

But even as her fury built up, she noticed something that replaced it with disgust.

The unknown robot was like the other models she'd faced in the fortress, only red. The other major difference was that the clear dome revealed not a complex CPU, but a live human brain. The cult had gone so far as to surgically remove a person's brain and place it in a robot? What kind of sick people were in charge?

"Well," chuckled a familiar voice, "I suppose the facade couldn't have gone on forever."

Roll's jaw dropped. "Reverend Dark?!" she shouted incredulously.

"Samuel Tiberius Dark is dead," the robot declared, activating a rotating electromagnetic field around himself in preparation for further combat. "I am the Dark Man!"

Roll fumed. The nutjob was going down. She couldn't let him spread his fanatical poison an- 10|\|&3Reht^%4656%76&)=()(^$!***************

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 6 using secondary Anchor candidate:

Roll was really disturbed right about now.

The constellation droids, she could handle. Even if Gemini looked like a robot hermaphroditic transvestite.

Having to fight a slew of Dr. Wily's robot masters along with them, she could handle as well.

What was creeping her out though was the addition to the team that accompanied her and her friends.

The chinese robot Fan seemed to have no personality whatsoever. He didn't talk, emote, or anything. He just stood there and stared blankly at whatever was in front of him despite the fact that he was supposedly just as advanced and human-like as Roll herself.

He was looking at her again. With those empty eyes that just seemed to cons|_||\/|3 3^3R-74!|\|&#$%vu^ct5**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 7 using secondary Anchor candidate:

Roll cheered from her seat in the pulsing crowd.

Everything was going great. Dr. Wily hadn't been heard from in a while, both she and her brother Rock were actually going to school, Rock had a girlfriend named Chelsea, and they were all about to enjoy the latest rock and roll sensation.

"Greetings everyone!" yelled a boombox-themed robot master from the stage. "I'm DJ Jazzy J4-8950, and I'm your mix artist for the evening! Are you all ready to rock?!"

The crowd cheered.

"I said, ARE YOU ALL READY TO ROCK?!"

The cheers became thunderous.

"Then welcome to the stage the newest mechanical music sensation, and my fellow band mates: The Dreamwaves!" DJ Jazzy yelled to the crowd. "On drums, we have the incredible BARRAGE MAN!"

The crowd yelled in approval for the massive 25-foot tall robot and his equally huge drum set that took up the entire back of the stage.

"On guitar, keyboard, bass, and saxaphone, we have the amazing MULTI MAN!"

The cheers continued for the self-replicating instrumentalist.

"And on vocals is the sensational EXPRESS MAN!"

A blur zoomed to the center of the stage and the sleek form of the band leader stood before the delirious crowd.

"But before we begin, I'm afraid I have some sad news for everyone," DJ Jazzy said somberly.

The crowd's cheering died down in confusion.

"I'm afraid Dr. Wily has ordered your termination," DJ Jazzy intoned ominously as the eyes of all the band robots turned glowing red. "Nothing personal, you understand."

And with that, the robots jumped off the stage, which itself rumbled and stood up, revealing a massive Godzilla-sized steel machine that looked very much like the devil series robots and towered over the suddenly terrified crowd.

It was about then that the screaming finally st
R73|)%Y$n8k&df54tf#%^**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 8 using secondary Anchor candidate:

Roll stood behind her brother the hero as he faced down the strange alien robot known as Terra.

She worried for her brother, partly because she had false memories of a reality where he'd failed at being the hero and was brutally murdered for it. She also had false memories of taking his place for multiple lifetimes, during one of which she'd failed catastrophically. So she'd let her brother volunteer and trusted him to save the world, but she'd requested to be outfitted as his field support to help make sure he stayed alive. It had worked so far, but this opponent worried her more than any other and she wasn't really sure why.

"So," Terra sneered down at them, "this is what the pathetic inhabitants of this planet have to defend them. I am not impressed."

"This is your only warning," Rock called confidently. "Cease all hostile actions and leave this planet in peace!"

"Or what?" Terra laughed mockingly. "Your weapons couldn't even scratch me. Here, I'll even give you a free shot to prove it. And when you fail, you die pathetic Earth scrap."

With that, Terra spread his arms wide in invitation. Mutely, Rock took him up on the offer and shot to disable, only for the buster shot to dissipate harmlessly on what looked like a personal energy field surrounding Terra.

"My turn," Terra grinned maniacally and pointed his hand at the blue bomber. "SPARK CHASER!"

"ROCK!" Roll screamed as the laser weapon zig-zagged from Terra and straight through her brother's head. An instant later, several more proceeded to shred the rest of his body mercilessly.

"NOOOOOO!" Roll wailed in grief and fury as she saw her brother fall. She felt herself move and Tango attach to her as her arms simultaneously formed into clawed weapons of destruction. Some rational part of her mind noted that Dr. Light had never given her the modifications she was now using, but the rest of her didn't care. All that mattered was hurting Terra as much as possible.

Terra was caught off-guard in shock at her transformation and he took a rocket claw to the face before he could recover, and then Roll was upon him. Her purely physical weapons rent through Terra's defensive energy field with only some resistance and she clawed apart his body with fury, ripping out large chunks of his torso at the same time.

In the space of a few seconds, she'd rendered the alien invader to a shredded mess and let his body fall lifelessly to the ground while she mourned for her brother.

Or, that's what would have happened if Terra hadn't stood back up.

Roll stared in shock and horror at the sight of Terra getting back to his feet. She'd not only shredded his armor and ripped out at least half his vital mechanisms, but she'd also taken half his head off... and he was still moving...

The apparently undead robot raised his damaged fingers in her direction and yelled her death sentence.

"$P R| CH $ER!"

Roll found herself incapable of moving as the lethal laser weapon that had killed her brother cut a jagged line right towar|)$ 43RET%$76gy45%^65vy54**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 9 using secondary Anchor candidate:

If there was any robot that Roll genuinely hated, it was the future-tech clone of her that Dr. Wily made named Waltz. According to some glitchy memory errors – one set of several she possessed – if Rock had stepped forth to become a hero he'd have gotten a counterpart named Quint. A bitter and disenchanted robot who was originally convinced that he was somehow Rock himself from the future, and had not taken the truth of his origins very well after he'd returned to said future.

Waltz? Waltz was batshit insane.

The Dimensions, a set of robot masters from the future, when they had been led by Quint – or 'Mega Man's Shadow' as he'd taken to calling himself by then – in this other life had been rather typical of robot masters like what Dr. Wily had unleashed. That is, dangerous and causing lots of property damage, but relatively minimal loss of life all things considered. They were far more concerned with taking over territory than they were with killing people.

Under Waltz, the Dimensions were little more than crazed killers that put forth more effort targeting civilians than infrastructure. Their initial appearance had been a bloodbath.

Thankfully, Waltz's brother Bass had no more love for his insane sister than Roll herself did and had been all too happy to help her destroy the Dimensions and face off against Waltz herself.

Unfortunately, Waltz had been ready for them and the two of them had suffered severe injuries in bringing her down. Bass had lost one of his arms at the shoulder, Treble had half his body strewn over the battlefield, and Roll estimated her armor had more holes than swiss cheese. It was a miracle she was still functional.

But they had won. Waltz was missing her entire body from the waist down, her teleporter circuits were fried, and her arms were useless.

There was no way she could escape this time.

"It's over," Roll brandished her chosen weapon at the fallen Waltz, a telescoping broom made of highly durable material. Despite its appearance, it made for quite the lethal weapon when she chose for it to and many foes had fallen prey to it after laughing at its appearance.

"You haven't seen the last of me," Waltz grinned maniacally from where she lay.

"What makes you think that?" Roll managed not to sneer, her expression studiously neutral.

"Because father gave me the kind of data copying ability yours gave you and that my dear brother got as well," Waltz laughed dementedly. "I've seen your memories."

Roll's eyes widened involuntarily.

"I've seen that this hasn't been your first time through..." Waltz said darkly. "And it won't be the last. It's only a matter of time before I repeat like you have and then I'll KILL EVERYTHING YOU EVER LOVED WHILE I MAKE YOU WATCH H31|13$$1-wtd5ce5vy6654$^&^*($# #$$%**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

SECONDARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE DEEMED UNVIABLE DUE TO SUCCESSIVE FAILURES

ADDITIONAL SECONDARY ANCHOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY UNRECOVERABLE

PROCEEDING TO TERTIARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE

Attempt 1) I actually kind of liked the Mega Man cartoon show...

Attempt 2) *Novas Aventuras de Megaman* . Yeah, it's pretty much like that.

Attempt 3) Aloha.

Attempt 4) Something just went very wrong...

Attempt 5) Reverend Dark is the product of my own twisted imagination. Feel free to toss him Ian Flynn's way and see if he sticks.

Attempt 6) Fan is just kind of... there in the game he's from. He doesn't really contribute anything to the storyline as far as any source I can locate reveals.

Attempt 7) If you're unfamiliar with the names introduced here, they're all from the 4-issue run of *Mega Man* in Dreamwave Comics before they folded.

Attempt 8) Since when was Terra a zombie?

Attempt 9) Oh crap.

Tertiary Anchor Candidate

Yggdrasil Threat Classification: The rating system goes from 1-5 in descending order of severity.

Category 1 - Capable of dealing critical damage to Yggdrasil's systems. This has happened *once* and the event resulted in the Loops themselves becoming necessary to keep the whole system from crashing. A great deal of Yggdrasil's remaining power, roughly 90% at least, is dedicated to ensuring there's not a second.

Category 2 - Capable of completely destroying a branch of Yggdrasil's system (more commonly known as a Loop). A looper, particularly an Anchor, ascending to the divine level is the most well-known method to trigger a category 2 event. There have been two confirmed category 2 events. Madoka of the Puella Magica Loop was manipulated by her looping familiar Kyuubey into causing the first by ascending to the divine level, and the second was an event now known to loopers across the multiverse as The Crash. Much of what Yggdrasil operators do is meant to prevent potential category 2 events.

Category 3 - Capable of inducing metaphysical instability. Whether Loop or looper, metaphysical instability is *bad* and, left unchecked, could worsen to a full-blown category 2 event. Yggdrasil operators have been known to intervene in category 3 events to prevent them from so worsening.

Category 4 - Serious threat in-universe. Basically anything an experienced or veteran looper could have significant trouble dealing with. A number of category 4 events result in universal destruction and/or the premature end of a Loop iteration. Little chance of causing serious metaphysical instability, so they're rather low on Yggdrasil's long list of priorities right now. Loopers are officially on their own dealing with these things.

Category 5 - Standard competent villain level threat, and not even a blip on Yggdrasil's radar at this point. Generally a negligible threat to an experienced looper.

Attempting Loop Activation:

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 1 using tertiary Anchor candidate:

Blues didn't betray the worry he felt as he faced off against the self-proclaimed King of Robots yet again. It was actually quite the feat given that his opponent had bisected him in their last encounter.

Their second – or was it fourth? His memory was kind of screwy lately – encounter really wasn't going any better for him either due to that danged energy reflecting shield. There was no two ways about it. The shield had to go.

He was about to overload his buster for a massive shot that would surely destroy the shield when his screwy memory showed him the outcome of such an action.

'Time to do something different,' he thought to himself and charged at King, intending to vault over the shield and fire point blank at his face instead.

As he approached, reality itself seemed to short out for an instant and suddenly King was holding his axe instead. And bringing down towards Blues's head with all his strength.

'How?' was all Blues had time to think before he was cut in two onc3 & !|\|%$uB&%!(%0**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 2 using tertiary Anchor candidate:

This was wrong. This wasn't how everything was supposed to go. He was supposed to be the disenchanted first creation of Dr. Light. An experimental military model with the mental programming of a son the man never had who ran away because he was afraid that a repair to his faulty power core would end up erasing his personality.

He most certainly wasn't supposed to have been the last hope of humanity in a post-apocalyptic world where Wily had not only won, but apparently done so without any resistance whatsoever while at the same time framing Dr. Light for crimes Wily had committed. He wasn't supposed to have lost his faith in humanity and be forced to duel his brother to the death for defending them, and then watch as humanity's lack of will caused even Rock to lose faith.

But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to stop himself. Surely this w $ 4311******

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 3 using tertiary Anchor candidate:

This was much more familiar to Blues. His life was far from perfect, but it was more the purgatory his oldest memory errors depicted than the utter hell of the more recent ones. He'd made his share of mistakes... again, but he had the chance to make things right.

He would start by helping his younger brother destroy Ra Moon.

"When this is over, you and I have a lot to discuss," Rock said to him.

"Focus on the battle at hand," Blues reminded him, thankful his Break Man persona concealed his pained wince at his brothers tone.

The allied robot masters of doctors Light and Wily gathered around the two and prepared to breach Ra Moon's chamber.

It was then that he felt something touch his mind. Something sinister, foul, and completely uncaring for all life. He tried to push it back, but he might as well have tried to push back the tide itself as the presence swept over his consciousness and took over his body, forcing him to watch as he raised his buster at his own brother.

"Like the one here," he heard the voice of Ra Moon come from his own mouth as he shot his brother in the back.

He watched, horrified, as Rock fell lifelessly to the ground amidst the utterly shocked expressions of the other robot masters.

"For the glory of Ra M00n#$VY^$Y%$fyt4%4&^56)
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ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 4 using tertiary Anchor candidate:

'I'm being punished,' Blues thought to himself. *'That's all there is to it.'*

His memory errors were getting clearer, so he was certain of this fact. He'd forsaken his father and turned on his family in his original life and never truly made any effort to heal the rift that had formed. So he was forced to live through lives where he failed to protect them or was forced to betray them even worse than he had.

What else could he conclude? He'd ended the last run-through by murdering his brother while under mind control from Ra Moon, and he'd spent the entirety of this one attempting to do the same while unable to disobey orders from Dr. Wily. He could only thank the

powers that be that he was far less competent at it this time than previously.

"You know," he heard himself saying in that nasally voice he seemed to have right now as he continued to shoot at Rock, "I'd honestly prefer to have you working for Dr. Wily like I am, but orders are orders."

"That's right," Rock replied in a manner completely unlike him. "You're nothing but a robot you outmoded model. Your destiny is to follow orders and be a good little weapon until your masters and betters make a better one and send you to the scrap heap."

Blues found himself completely frozen, unable to move as Rock's face turned ugly and sinister. He could only watch and listen in horror as the favorite son of Dr. Light – and he knew in his heart that Rock deserved it more than he – turned into his own antithesis before his eyes.

"You're right to be jealous of me," Rock continued, activating a set of shades on his own helmet just like Blues's. "After all, I'm the latest model. New and improved in every way. The son Dr. Light *really* wanted all along."

As he spoke, Rock wound a purple scarf around his neck and his helmet shifted in appearance until Blues could have sworn he was looking at himself wearing blue armor instead of red.

"Because all I am is *you* , except better."

Blues wanted to do something, anything, but all he could do was watch immobile as his brother, looking so much like Blues himself, raised his buster to Blues's head and began charging.

"There's no room for last year's m0|)3145b5u7-[0[pp;}{|**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 5 using tertiary Anchor candidate:

Blues woke up in his room at Light Labs feeling a sensation that a human would have recognized as eerily close to a cold sweat.

'I was about to be shot by my brother...' he thought in terror, which turned quickly to confusion. *'No... I don't have a brother... But it looked like me? Was I about to get shot by myself?'*

Blues shook his head. It must have been what humans called a nightmare. He'd really have rather learned that he could dream from a more pleasant example though.

He remembered now. He'd suffered a failure in his core during a field test due to some unforeseen fault and his father had sent him to bed while he explored options to fix the problem. Hopefully in a way that didn't rewrite Blues's mind.

Blues shuddered as he thought about that. He liked the way he was and he didn't want to lose that. With this in mind, he made his way towards his father's room where he could see a light on. As he approached the door, he heard his father talking with someone and, despite himself, he listened in.

"I hate getting into debates with you," he heard his father say.

"You called me for my dazzling insight," an unfamiliar voice retorted, with the typical distortion caused by long-distance communication devices. "Or did you just call to complain about your boy?"

Blues couldn't quite make out the first part of the response, but he heard the rest of it loud and clear.

"Honestly, it would be easier if I *did* write that rebellious streak out of him..."

Blues backed away from the door in horror. His own father would rewrite his mind? No... It couldn't be possible...

He ran back to his room, tears trailing down his face. He had just started to toss energy tanks into a sack when an extremely clear memory error hit him.

It showed what would happen if he went down this path. A life alone, slowly dying from the flaw in his power core. A rift with his father that could never be healed. Death battles with robots who should have been his dearest siblings. Becoming a villain. A living hell of his own making.

He paused, and thought about the situation for a moment. His father hadn't quite sounded like someone who had actually meant to undertake that course of action. Maybe... Maybe his father *wouldn't* actually rewrite his mind over this? Maybe this... was a misunderstanding.

Blues made his decision. He'd trust his father, the one who had taught him what doing the right thing meant, to do the right thing himself. And maybe he could have a real family this time.

He turned around, and saw Dr. Light standing in the doorway to the room.

"Oh, hi father," he greeted, relieved despite being startled. "I didn't know you were there."

"Quite alright my boy," his father returned amiably. Still, something seemed... off. "I was just talking with a colleague of mine and I decided that fixing your power core couldn't wait. Please come with me."

Blues followed his father, a bit confused at the sudden shift in the repair timetable, but staying with his decision to trust his creator. The off feeling didn't go away though. If anything, it grew stronger as they approached the lab.

He obediently lay down on the table, and was a bit surprised when he suddenly found himself restrained.

"What?" he blurted in confusion. The confusion only grew as his father opened the access in his head rather than his torso. "What are you doing?"

"Oh," Dr. Light smiled in what should have been a kindly manner, if his eyes hadn't suddenly taken on an evil appearance. "Well, the fault with the power core is only a minor one you see."

Blues didn't see, and as his father gathered up some sinister looking tools he realized that he really wasn't going to like what was about to happen.

"The real problem lies in your programming," Dr. Light continued in that kind fatherly voice from the twisted evil face. "Far too free-willed. Completely unsuited to the contract. Building a new model would just take too long. Far easier to remove the unnecessary subroutines and continue with you. You understand, don't you?"

Blues wanted to scream that he didn't understand, and to let him go, but his mouth refused to work.

"Excellent," Dr. Light said in a voice not his own as he began the procedure.

Blues tried to scream as he felt his mind being torn a| R7}+) {"Pl0{_)^&:**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 6 using tertiary Anchor candidate:

Blues clutched his he4d in 4gony. Wh4t fre5h h3ll w4s h3 be!ng thr0wn !nto thi$ t!me? Wh3n w0u1d th!s ni&47|\/|4R3

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ATTEMPT FAILED

WARNING: RELEVANT BRANCH OF YGGDRASIL SYSTEM BECOMING DANGEROUSLY UNSTABLE. ATTEMPTING TO SET TO READ-ONLY.

WARNING: BRANCH SEVERELY DAMAGED. SETTING BRANCH TO READ-ONLY MAY RESULT IN DATA BEING UNRECOVERABLE.

PROCEED? Y/N

Y:\ N

READ-ONLY SETTING ABORTED.

DETERMINING ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF ACHIEVING STABILITY...

LINKED LOOP PROTOCOLS DETERMINED TO POSSESS HIGHEST PROBABILITY OF SUCCEEDING.

ASSESSING LINKED LOOP PROTOCOLS...

SECTION 1: APPROACHING CRITICAL CORRUPTION LEVELS. ANCHOR CANDIDATES PROVEN UNVIABLE WITHOUT AID.

SECTION 2: CRITICAL CORRUPTION LEVELS DETECTED. ANCHOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY UNRECOVERABLE.

SECTION 3: CRITICAL CORRUPTION LEVELS DETECTED. ANCHOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY UNRECOVERABLE.

SECTION 4: CRITICAL CORRUPTION LEVELS DETECTED. ANCHOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY UNRECOVERABLE.

SECTION 5: CRITICAL CORRUPTION LEVELS DETECTED. ANCHOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY UNRECOVERABLE.

SECTION 6: CRITICAL CORRUPTION LEVELS DETECTED. ANCHOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY UNRECOVERABLE.

SECTION 7: CRITICAL CORRUPTION LEVELS DETECTED. ANCHOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY UNRECOVERABLE.

SECTION X: SECTION NOT FOUND.

CONCLUSION: LINKED LOOP PROTOCOLS IMPOSSIBLE AT THIS TIME.

ASSESSING FURTHER ALTERNATIVE METHODS...

UNIVERSAL DATA PATCH DEEMED MOST LIKELY AVAILABLE METHOD TO SUCCEED.

PROCEED? Y/N

Y:\ Y

ATTEMPTING EMERGENCY UNIVERSAL DATA PATCH VIA 'JUMPSTART' PROTOCOLS.

SEARCHING FOR DONOR LOOP...

VIABLE DONOR FOR UNIVERSAL PATCH DETERMINED.

BEGINNING FUSED LOOP...

Attempt 1) King is actually kind of a badass if you think about it.

Attempt 2) Inspired by the musical group The Protomen.

Attempt 3) Comic Ra Moon is freaking scary.

Attempt 4) Blues is stuck in a nightmare he can't wake up from.

Attempt 5) ...That's just wrong.

Attempt 6) Did... did the Loop attempt just fail in less than ten seconds?

The Crash

The Crash - An event by which an Anchor was destroyed and their entire branch erased from existence at the conceptual level, erasing even its backup data in the Hub (i.e. any fiction regarding it in our universe). The reverberations of this caused the premature termination of *every* Loop iteration running at the time, set every known looper to active status in an attempt to prevent further damage to existing Loops, and shook out a few new loopers in a number of places, some of which suffered minor bugs in their reality code that have since done wonky stuff to them (ex: Silver Spoon in the MLP Loops who had her species marker knocked off kilter).

And you're about to see it happen.

Attempting Loop Jumpstart:

(Hint: This *should* be possible to decode, but the site may have eaten a few characters. Use https(colonslashslash) d o c s. goog l e.c o m (slash)document(slash)d(slash)10vGkNCfelRpmCjvPOyrFcYrjuQAREN65S7sYskpfMEo(slash)edit(questionmark)usp(equals)sharing for the properly encoded version. If you just don't want to, then the decoded version is at the bottom after the section with Hephaestus)

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt using fused Loop 'jumpstart' protocols with Anchor ***ERROR*** from Loop designated '***ERROR***':

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ð¹&Öu8Ï9&¯uƒ‹ðÏÏÒ&¯u¹&ŽðSž&·žž¯&³§Sž¯&ð&Eždu¯9&³Ïð¯džr&6
ŽžÒ&Öžƒž&ð&°ð§ƒÏÒ&ðSžƒð³ž&§¯9§S§98ðÏ&ð¯9&ð¯&§¯¹žƒ¯&ð¹&
¹Žž&ßƒu¯uE&Ð¯E¹§¹8¹žr&
(u¹&Qðƒ¹§d8ÏðƒÏÒ&SðÏ8ð·Ïž&ð&¹ðƒ³ž¹[&žEQžd§ðÏÏÒ&³§Sž¯&¹Žž&‹u
ƒž&Ež¯§uƒ&ð¯9&Ïð89ž9&‹ž‹·žƒE&ð¹&¹Žž&ßŽƒu¯uE&Ð¯E¹§¹8¹ž[&·8
¹&¹ŽžÒ&Öžƒž&§¯SuÏSž9&§¯&žSžƒÒ&E§¯³Ïž&ð¹¹ðde&ð¯9&Ežž‹ž9&
¹u&·ž&ð&Qƒ§uƒ§¹Ò&¹ðƒ³ž¹&°uƒ&hðƒe&˜§³‹ðr==ÆÏ8žE&Žð9&¯u&‹ž
‹uƒÒ&u°&¹Ž§E&Ž8‹ð¯&°ƒu‹&¹Žž&uƒ§³§¯ðÏ&¹§‹žÏ§¯ž[&·8¹&Žž&
e¯žÖ
[&Eu‹žŽuÖ[&¹Žð¹&¹Žž&§¯¹žƒ¯&ÖðE&S§¹ðÏÏÒ&§‹Quƒ¹ð¯¹r==¿Ž§dŽ
&‹ð9ž&¹Žž&°ðd¹&¹Žð¹&¹ŽžÒ]9&^8E¹&·žž¯&e§9¯ðQQž9&·Ò&Eu‹ž&

Æu·ð&±ž¹¹&Öð¯¯ð·ž&dðÏÏž9&]#u9žÏ&}]&žEQžd§ðÏÏÒ&Öuƒƒ Ò§¯³r==
Þž]9&°uÏÏuÖž9&Ž§E&E§·Ï§¯³E&ðE&¹ŽžÒ&¹ƒðdež9&¹Žž&e§9¯ðQQž
ƒ&¹u&ÖŽð¹&Ïuuež9&Ï§ež&ð&Ïðƒ³ž&Öðƒžžu8Ež[&9ž¹žƒ‹§¯ž9&¹u&·ð
de&¹Žž‹&8Q&ÖŽ§Ïž&¹Žž§ƒ&u¹Žžƒ&ðÏÏ§žE&Öžƒž&E8QQƒžEE§¯³&¹
Žž&ð¹¹ðdeE&žÏEžÖŽžƒž&‹žð¯¹&¹u&E‹uežEdƒžž¯&¹Žž&e§9¯ðQQ§¯
³r&Þž&Ž§9&§¯&¹Žž&ƒð°¹žƒE&ð¯9&Öð§¹ž9&°uƒ&Ž§E&‹u‹ž¯¹&ÖŽ§Ï
ž&Øude&ð¯9&ØuÏÏ&du¯°ƒu¯¹ž9&¹Žž&S§Ïž&#u9žÏ&}r==#u9žÏ&}]E&Q
ƒ§‹ðƒÒ&ÖžðQu¯&Ežž‹ž9&¹u&·ž&ð&EŽu8Ï9žƒ0‹u8¯¹ž9&dð¯¯u¯[&ð
¯9&ÖŽ§Ïž&§¹&ÖðE&ð¯&ð¹ÒQ§dðÏ&9žE§³¯&¹Žž&ÖžðQu¯&ÖðE&§‹‹
ž¯EžÏÒ&QuÖžƒ°8Ï&ð¯9&¹Žž&ƒu·u¹]E&Q8ƒQÏž&ðƒ‹uƒ&ð¯9&u¹Žžƒ&
QŽÒE§dðÏ&ð·§Ï§¹§žE&Öžƒž&dÏžðƒÏÒ&§¯&¹Žž&Eð‹ž&dÏðEE&ðE&¹Ž
ž&ŽžÏÏ§EŽ&98u&#u9žÏ&
&ð¯9&#u9žÏ&×r==Æ8¹&Ž§E&·ƒu¹Žžƒ&ð¯9&E§E¹žƒ&Öžƒž&¯u&EÏu8
dŽžE&¹Žž‹EžÏSžE[&ð¯9&¹ŽžÒ]9&Ïžðƒ¯ž9&QÏž¯¹Ò&°§³Ž¹§¯³&¹Žž&ð°
uƒž‹ž¯¹§u¯ž9&ƒu·u¹Er&#u9žÏ&}&‹§³Ž¹&·ž&°ðE¹žƒ[&E¹ƒu¯³žƒ[&ð¯9&
¹u8³Žžƒ[&·8¹&Žž&Žð9&¯uÖŽžƒž&¯žðƒ&Ž§E&E§·Ï§¯³]E&du‹·ð¹&ž÷
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&·ÏuÖ&Žð9&E¹8¯¯ž9&ØuÏÏ&ð¯9&ð&ÖžÏÏ0¹§‹ž9&³ƒð·&Žð9&§‹‹u·§Ï§¢
ž9&Øuder&#u9žÏ&}&ÖðE&¯uÖ&dŽðƒ³§¯³&8Q&Ž§E&EŽu8Ï9žƒ&dð¯
¯u¯&°uƒ&ð&Qu§¯¹0·Ïð¯e&EŽu¹&¹Žð¹&Öu8Ï9&E8ƒžÏÒ&e§ÏÏ&Ž§E&·ƒ
u¹Žžƒr==ÆÏ8žE&e¯žÖ&¹Žž&¹§‹ž&¹u&ðd¹&ÖðE&¯uÖr=="&Qƒžd§E§
u¯&E¯§Qžƒ0EŽu¹&¹u&¹Žž&ŽžÏ‹ž¹&³u¹&#u9žÏ&}]E&ð¹¹ž¯¹§u¯&¯§džÏ
Ò&ð¯9&Øude&¹uue&°8ÏÏ&ð9Sð¯¹ð³ž&u°&¹Žž&9§E¹ƒðd¹§u¯r&Þž&·ƒ
u8³Ž¹&Ž§E&ðƒ‹&dð¯¯u¯&8Q&§¯&ð&‹ð¯¯žƒ&¹Žð¹&Öu8Ï9&Q8¹&b8§
de9ƒðÖ&ðƒ¹§E¹E&¹u&EŽð‹ž&ð¯9&°§ƒž9&Ž§E&uÖ¯&dŽðƒ³ž9&EŽu
¹r==˜¹ƒð§³Ž¹&9uÖ¯&¹Žž&·ðƒƒžÏ&u°&#u9žÏ&}]E&EŽu8Ï9žƒ0‹u8¯¹ž9&
dð¯¯u¯r==6Žž&ž÷QÏuE§u¯&¹uue&#u9žÏ&}]E&ðƒ‹&u°
°&ð¹&¹Žž&EŽu8Ï9žƒ&ð¯9&Ž8ƒÏž9&Øude&·ðde&EžSžƒðÏ&‹ž¹žƒE&°ƒ
u‹&¹Žž&°uƒdžr&Ð¹&Ïuuež9&ðE&§°&#u9žÏ&}&Öu8Ï9&ƒžduSžƒ&·ž°u
ƒž&Øude&9§9[&·8¹&8¯Ï8de§ÏÒ&°uƒ&Ž§‹[&ØuÏÏ&Öu8Ï9¯]¹&ðÏÏuÖ&Ž
§‹&¹Žž&ð9Sð¯¹ð³žr&6Žž&ßƒðEŽ&Æu‹·&EŽž&°§ƒž9&Ž§¹&Qžƒ°žd¹Ï
Ò&u¯&¹Žž&9ð‹ð³ž9&Quƒ¹§u¯&u°&#u9žÏ&}]E&¹uƒEu[&ð¯9&¹Žž&ž÷Q
ÏuE§u¯&9žd§‹ð¹ž9&¹Žž&9žÏ§dð¹ž&§¯¹žƒ¯ðÏ&EÒE¹ž‹E&¹Žð¹&Öžƒž&
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8žE&°ƒu¢ž&§¯&Žuƒƒuƒr&Þž&9§9¯]¹&Žžðƒ&¹Žž&°uÏÏuÖ§¯³&E¹ð¹ž‹ž
¯¹&ð¹&ðÏÏr&Þž&ÖðE&¹uu&ÏuE¹&§¯&ð&¹žƒƒ§·Ïž&‹ž‹uƒÒ&ÖŽžƒž&hƒr

&¾§³Ž¹&ÖðE&ðd¹§¯³rrr&¯u¹&Ï§ež&hƒr&¾§³Ž¹r&6Žž&¯u¹0hƒr&¾§³Ž¹&Žð9&Eð§9&¹Žð¹&SžƒÒ&Öuƒ9&§¯&¹Žð¹&SžƒÒ&Su§džr&Þž&Žð9¯]¹&·žž¯&ð·Ïž&¹u&QÏðdž&¹Žž&Su§dž&¹Žž¯r==Æ8¹&Žž&9§9&¯uÖr==±8ƒ¹ŽžƒÆ‹8E§¯³E&Öžƒž&d8¹&u°°&ðE&Žž&ÖðE&Q8‹Qž9&°8ÏÏ&u°&žÏžd¹ƒ§dðÏ&SuÏ¹ð³ž&ð¯9&QÏ8‹‹ž¹ž9&°ƒu‹&Ž§E&QuE§¹§u¯&§¯&¹Žž&ƒð°¹žƒE&ðE&ð&ƒžE8Ï¹r&Þž&°žÏÏ[&ð¯9&ežQ¹&°ðÏÏ§¯³&QðE¹&ÖŽžƒž&¹Žž&°Ïuuƒ&EŽu8Ï9&ŽðSž&·žž¯r&6Žž&ÏðE¹&¹Ž§¯³&Žž&EðÖ&·ž°uƒž&Žž&·Ïðdež9&u8¹&ÖðE&¹Žž&°ðƒ0ðÖðÒ&Edž¯ž&u°&¹Žž&ÖðƒžŽu8Ež&ƒuu°&ðE&ð&EŽð9uÖ&dÏuEž9&u‹§¯u8EÏÒ&·žÏuÖ&§¹r==00000==¿Žž¯&ÆÏ8žE&dð‹ž&¹u[&Žž&e¯žÖ&Žž&ÖðE&ƒžE¹ƒð§¯ž9r&Þ§E&ðƒ‹E&ð¯9&Ïž³E&ÖžƒžŽ&·u8¯9&§¯&ð¯&]×]&°uƒ‹ð¹§u¯&ð¯9&§‹QuEE§·Ïž&¹u&‹uSžr&*Qž¯§¯³&Ž§E&žÒžE[&Žž&EðÖ&¹Žð¹&Ž§E&·ƒu¹ŽžƒžðŽ¯9&E§E¹žƒ&ÖžƒžŽ&E§‹§ÏðƒÏÒ&·u8¯9r&6Žž§ƒ&QÏðdž‹ž¯¹&ðƒu8¯9&¹Žž&ƒuu‹&°uƒ‹ž9&ð&¹ƒ§ð¯³Ïž[&ždŽ&u°&¹Žž‹&°ðd§¯³&¹Žž&dž¯¹žƒ&ÖŽžƒž&¹Žž&Ž8‹ð¯&§¯¹žƒ¯&\\²ØØ*Ø\\&9ð¯³Ïž9&°ƒu‹&¹Žž&dž§Ï§¯³r&6ðe§¯³&ð&Ïuue&ðƒu8¯9[&ÆÏ8žE&ƒžðÏ§¢ž9&¹ŽžÒ&ÖžƒžŽ&ðÏÏ&Žuuež9&8Q&¹u&ð&³§ð¯¹&‹ðdŽ§¯ž[&¹Žž§ƒ&·§¯9§¯³E&Qðƒ¹&u°&Eu‹ž&Euƒ¹&u°&d§ƒd8§¹r==6Žž&Q8ƒQuEž&u°&§¹&ÖðE&·žÒu¯9&Ž§E&ž÷Qžƒ§ž¯dž[&·8¹&ÆÏ8žE&ÖðE&Ö§ÏÏ§¯³&¹u&·ž¹&žSžƒÒ¹Ž§¯³&¹Žð¹&§¹&ÖðE¯]¹&³uu9r==©¿žÏdu‹ž[©&¹Žž&Su§dž&°ƒu‹&·ž°uƒž&E¹ð¹ž9[&¯u&Ïu¯³žƒ&Eu8¯9§¯³&Ï§ež&§¹&ÖðE&·ƒuð9dðE¹ž9r&6Žž&uÖ¯žƒ&u°&¹Žž&Su§dž&ÖðE&§¯&¹Ž§E&ƒuu‹r&©¿žÏdu‹ž&¹u&¹Žž&Žžð9b8ðƒ¹žƒE&u°&‹Ò&Ï§¹¹Ïž&uƒ³ð¯§¢ð¹§u¯r&Ð&ð‹&Eu&³Ïð9&¹Žð¹&Òu8&ðÏÏ&du8Ï9&°§¯ðÏÏÒ&^u§¯&‹žr©==ÆÏ8žE&EŽ§Sžƒž9&ð¹&¹Žž&°ð‹§Ï§ðƒ&Su§dž&ð¯9&Ïuuež9&¹uÖðƒ9E&¹Žž&°§³8ƒž&ðE&Žž&E¹žQQž9&§¯¹u&¹Žž&Ï§³Ž¹r&Þž&ÖðE&9§°°žƒž¯¹r&Þž&Žð9&ÖŽð¹&Ïuuež9&Ï§ež&ð&E‹ðÏÏ&ƒž9&³ž‹&§¯&¹Žž&‹§99Ïž&u°&Ž§E&°uƒžŽžð9[&Ž§E&Žð§ƒ&Ežž‹ž9&‹uƒž&·Ï8ž&¹Žð¯&¹Žž&ž÷Qžd¹ž9&³ƒðÒ[&Ž§E&žÒžE&Öžƒž&Ž§99ž¯&·žŽ§¯9&ð&Qð§ƒ&u°&ð¯³8Ïðƒ&EŽð9žE&¹Žð¹&E¹§ÏÏ&°ð§Ïž9&¹u&Ž§9ž&ŽuÖ&dƒð¢ž9&Ž§E&ž÷QƒžEE§u¯&ÖðE[&Žž&ÖðE&9ƒžEEž9&‹uƒž&°§¯žÏÒ&¹Žð¯&ÆÏ8žE&ƒž‹ž‹·žƒž9[&ð¯9&Žž&Žð9&ð&Ee8ÏÏ0¹uQQž9&dð¯ž&¹Žð¹&ÖðE&dÏžðƒÏÒ&°uƒ&ðQQžðƒð¯džE&u¯ÏÒ[&·8¹&E¹§ÏÏ&ÆÏ8žE&du8Ï9&¯žSžƒ&ŽðSž&‹§E¹ðež¯&Ž§‹&°uƒ&ð¯Òu¯ž&žÏEžr==©¥žE[&§¹&§E&Ð[&#u9žÏ&¿[&¹Žž&Ïžð9žƒ&u°&hðƒe&˜§³‹ð[&¹Žž&Øž³ðÏ&!§¯³[&hƒr&"¾Æ²Ø6¡& *¿²Ð¾¡* & ***¿Ð¾¥¡***©==6Žž&ž÷QƒžEE§u¯E&u°&¹Žž&°u8ƒ&dðQ¹§SžE&Öžƒž&SðE¹ÏÒ&

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°žƒž¯¹r&\\²ØØ*Ø\\&dÏžðƒÏÒ&Žð9&¯u&§9žð&ÖŽu&Ž§E&dðQ¹uƒ&Öð
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Žƒžž&u°&Òu8&Žð9&§¹&ðÏÏ&ðÏu¯³¡©&¿§ÏÒ&ðdeÏž9r==©"¯9&¹Ž§E&
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E&8¯§SžƒEðÏ&Qƒ§Eu¯r&6Ž§E&§¯°§¯§¹Ò&u°&ƒžQžð¹§¯³&¹§‹žr©==
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°uƒ¹&u¯&dðQ¹8ƒ§¯³&ð&¯u·u9Ò&Ï§ež&Òu8ƒEžÏ°
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Öðƒž¯žEE&ð¯9&ð·§Ï§¹Ò&ðE&¹§‹ž&ƒžQžð¹E&§¹EžÏ°&§E&ÖŽð¹&Ð&
¯žž9r©==\\²ØØ*Ø\\&QÏžð9ž9&Eu‹ž¹Ž§¯³&·ðde&ð¹&¹Žž&9ud¹uƒ&¹Žð
¹&ÆÏ8žE&du8Ï9¯]¹&b8§¹ž&‹ðež&u8¹r==©*Ž[&·8¹&Ð& *dð¯*
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Žž¹§d&°uuÏ¡©==¿§ÏÒ&¹8ƒ¯ž9&EŽðƒQÏÒ&ð¯9&E¹ƒu9ž&¹u&ð&du¯¹ƒ
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Ò¡©&"¯9&Ö§¹Ž&¹Žð¹[&¿§ÏÒ&¹ŽƒžÖ&ð&EÖ§¹dŽr==²¯žƒ³Ò&Ž8‹‹ž9[&
ð¯9&ð&E¹ƒð§¯&¹Žð¹&ÆÏ8žE&du8Ï9¯]¹&ƒž‹ž‹·žƒ&°žžÏ§¯³&·ž°uƒž[&·
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CRASH

Loop -

Yggdrasil admin office for branch designated 'Mega':

Hephaestus regained consciousness to blaring alarms. He fought back the fog that pervaded his mind and the pain that wracked his body so he could orient himself. He hadn't felt this bad since the time he'd tried to pick a solo fight with Typhon back when he still believed anything he did could impress his bitch of a wife.

"REPEAT: ALL ADMINISTRATORS REPORT TO YOUR ASSIGNED LOOPS TO ASSIST ANCHORS IN RECOVERING. ALL OTHER YGGDRASIL PERSONNEL REPORT TO EMERGENCY STATIONS FOR DAMAGE ASSESSMENT. REPEAT: ALL ADMIN–"

Hephaestus tuned out the automated message. He'd get in trouble for not reporting as ordered, but it was likely he was already in a heap of trouble considering what he'd been doing before he had apparently collapsed, so a little more wasn't going to hurt him that much. The important thing was that he recover the logs from the fused Loop attempt. There was very vital information that needed to be salvaged from that.

If only he could remember what.

Shaking his head and telling himself that it would come back to him in time, he called up the Loop log and blinked. Loop designated '***ERROR***'? Anchor name ***ERROR***? That couldn't be right. They were clearly–

It was right then that Hephaestus realized that he had no clue what the names of the donor Loop and its Anchor were. He tried a memory retrieval spell on himself, and got nothing.

Crap.

That could only happen if the thing he was trying to remember had been conceptually erased from existence. The memories were

unretrievable because there *weren't any memories to retrieve* .

He checked the file for the fused Loop and found that it was completely corrupted. The data still existed, thank Kami-sama, but it was utterly unreadable. He checked the status of the Loop he was assigned to get functional, and sighed with relief that it hadn't been erased as well. In fact, it seemed the universal data patch procedure had been partially successful and it was more stable than it had been. Then there was the fact that he still remembered that there *had* been a donor universe and Anchor involved, so there was a chance, however slim, that their data still existed somewhere.

It was a desperate hope at best, but he'd take what he could get at this point.

He forwarded the corrupted file of the fused Loop to his superiors and proceeded to try and see what else could be salvaged from this endeavor. Some data that would perhaps justify the loss of a whole branch from Yggdrasil's mainframe.

Yggdrasil had been having more problems than just the Loops for a while now. At first they'd given loopers estimates on when Yggdrasil would be fixed, but as more Loops were brought online and Yggdrasil's depleted resources stretched ever thinner they'd pushed those estimates back. Eventually they'd stopped giving them at all.

It wasn't just the thinned-out resources to blame. As more of the universes were rendered provisionally functional through the Loops, an increasing number of bugs, malware, and viruses came with them. These things were normally kept under control with little issue, but that was when Yggdrasil was functioning at full power. With the damage and reduced power levels, these normally minor issues that could be safely ignored or tabled indefinitely were suddenly potentially significant threats to the vulnerable Loops.

Hephaestus remembered when the DC and Marvel Loops were rushed to functionality because they both contained some of the most comprehensive universal restoration code in Yggdrasil's

system. That code was now indispensable in keeping the Loops running despite being constantly attacked by annoyingly malicious code that he would swear spontaneously multiplied any time someone wasn't looking.

The god of the forge was brought out of his musings as he found what he was looking for. The comparison data analysis.

One of the things everyone did was compare events in the Loops to what little data they had on the category 1 event that had originally damaged Yggdrasil and made the Loops necessary in the first place. Such information could potentially allow them to speed up the repairs. If nothing else, they'd be able to spot a repeat event early enough that they could stop it before it became a problem – one category 1 event was more than enough for one eternity thank-you-very-much.

So far matches for the category 1 event hadn't risen above 20%, and that was the Skaia protocol. It likely meant that the event was something very similar to the Skaia protocol – which would be bad news because no one at the divine level had any knowledge of such a thing and the idea that one could be independently developed without any of the gods knowing was frightening – or the Skaia protocol itself was expanded upon to cause the event – an even more frightening prospect, especially since there had been no indication that the Skaia protocol had left its quarantine area in Yggdrasil prior to the event.

There it was.

CATEGORY 1 EVENT COMPARISON: 15% MATCH. NO COMMON DATA WITH SKAIA PROTOCOL.

That... that was bad. It indicated the latter scenario of someone getting a hold of the Skaia protocol without their knowledge and actually trying to 'improve' it. What really floored him was the next line.

VIRAL CONSCIOUSNESS SUCCESSFULLY DISSIPATED.

A *what?!*

Okay... a viral consciousness inside the Loop might explain some of the problems he'd been having, but he didn't immediately recall identifying it. He tried another memory retrieval spell to see if he could figure out what exactly had happened.

Memories came flooding back. He'd seen some really nasty viral code in the presence of something whose sole purpose could only be to breach dimensional barriers from 'below' while increasing the dimensions of its operator. The viral consciousness had invented an artificial method of ascending to the divine level.

It hadn't taken more than a moment to realize what was happening and he immediately requisitioned power from Yggdrasil, citing an imminent category 2 event to get a response rapid enough to make a difference. He'd brought his full personal power to bear, called in favors from other gods to bolster what he had, promised favors to a few more if they helped, and broke Almighty-knew-how-many regulations to siphon just the tiniest bit more out of Yggdrasil's over-extended reserves. A viral consciousness was attempting to ascend past the confines of the Loop and if it succeeded, they'd have a genuine fully sapient and highly intelligent divine-level virus loose in Yggdrasil's damaged systems. He hadn't had time to convince anyone of the seriousness for a concerted effort to be made, so he'd done what he could to get immediate results and effectively went it alone with only a fraction of the power he should have had to deal with the problem.

He'd slowed down relative time in the Loop while simultaneously speeding it up for himself, making every tense moment count as he coded furiously. As he tried to stop the dimensional breach it was triggering, he examined the viral code. The viral consciousness was too hardy for a direct assault, but it appeared to be a composite consciousness in addition to being viral. He could attack the cracks and force them apart, returning it to the component minds once

more. He was so focused on defeating the obvious threat that he hadn't noticed the direct metaphysical attack on the visiting Anchor in the background until it was too late.

When the Anchor gave out, his native Loop crashed hard enough that Hephaestus, directly connected to the fused Loop in his attempt to forestall disaster, had been rendered unconscious. As much as he wanted to mourn the loss of existence, he had to double-check Yggdrasil's claim that the consciousness had been effectively dissipated. Losing a Loop was bad enough. Having a viral consciousness *that* dangerous free in the system would be worse.

Of course, it was going to take some time digging up any records after a disruption like that. Better get star-

VIRAL CONSCIOUSNESS DISSIPATION RECORD COMPILED AND AVAILABLE FOR VIEWING.

VIEW NOW? Y/N

Hephaestus blinked. It was always weird when Yggdrasil did something like this. Anticipate something an operator would need and run the request on its own initiative. Yggdrasil's bouts of foresight were *always* useful, but they could get a touch creepy at times.

Y:\ Y

VIRAL CONSCIOUSNESS DISSIPATED VIA SUCCESSFUL FRAGMENTATION OF COMPOSITE CONSCIOUSNESS.

LIST OF INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESSES COMPRISING COMPOSITE THAT WERE RESTORED:

DR. ALBERT W. WILY

DATA CORRUPTED

DATA CORRUPTED

DATA CORRUPTED

DATA CORRUPTED

DATA CORRUPTED

DATA CORRUPTED

FILE NOT FOUND

UNKNOWN DATA

Hephaestus winced. He hated being reminded of just how damaged this branch was. One barely functional section, six that were too corrupted to recover without further repairs, and one that had effectively been 'misplaced' among all the corrupted data.

Plus something that apparently wasn't supposed to exist in this branch. Possibly an invading virus from outside or something that had germinated in the damaged branch as the activation attempts failed. It was hard to be certain with the way things were.

THREAT ASSESSMENT OF INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESSES:

CATEGORY 4 OR LESS.

That was a relief. Much better than the category 2 event that had just happened. Category 4s could safely be left to loopers to deal with, provided he could actually get the Loop functional of course.

He typed in a request for analysis of viable Anchors.

PRIMARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE: ROCK LIGHT - 25% CHANCE OF SUCCESSFUL LOOP ACTIVATION

SECONDARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE: ROLL LIGHT - 20% CHANCE OF SUCCESSFUL LOOP ACTIVATION

TERTIARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE: BLUES LIGHT - 10% CHANCE OF SUCCESSFUL LOOP ACTIVATION

Hephaestus swore. They were all more stable than before the universal data patch, but still nowhere near as stable as he'd like. Unlike most other offline branches, their branch was degrading with every failed activation attempt and it was possible for the whole branch to become completely unviable as soon as the next failure. He just couldn't take a chance on numbers that low.

With the other sections of the branch hopelessly corrupted until further repairs were made, a Linked Loop was simply impossible. The branch was also too corrupted to risk setting it to Read-Only lest it become completely unrecoverable as a result. And after what just happened there was simply no way another universal data patch via fused Loop would be authorized, even though the threat had been neutralized. The 'Mega' branch was officially omnia non grata until it was sufficiently stabilized.

Which meant it was time to get creative. Fortunately, Hephaestus was good at that. Being a patron god of invention had its perks.

He coded his idea furiously and ran it through Yggdrasil's precognitive data simulator.

66% CHANCE OF SUCCESSFUL LOOP ACTIVATION USING NEW PROTOCOLS.

Much better, but still a lot lower than he'd like. He racked his brain for anything he could do when he had a flash of brilliance. It was risky, but...

90% CHANCE OF SUCCESSFUL LOOP ACTIVATION USING NEW PROTOCOLS AND SCENARIO.

Hephaestus frowned. He'd honestly thought the number would be higher. He ran a number of variations on the scenario, but all the new simulations did was lower the number. He sighed as he

accepted the fact that the odds simply weren't going to get any better.

It was time to make a call. He picked up his office phone and dialed the relevant number.

A voice chittered back at him from the other end of the line and he fought the urge to roll his eyes. The trio of interns that served under the god he was trying to contact seemed to take great pleasure in being as odd as possible ever since their ascension shortly before the category 1 event, going so far as to invent a language just to mess with others. Fortunately he'd taken the effort to learn it himself and had little trouble understanding them.

"Yes, it's me," he said and waited while the intern chittered back at him. "I'm sure they are, but I have things I need to do before I can meet with them. Is Hermes available?"

The intern chittered back at him at length before letting him respond. "Yes, I'll hold."

It was not too long a wait before he heard the voice of the god he'd called for.

"Hephaestus! Baby!" Hermes drawled over the phone. "Just got finished filling Sonic and his buddies in on what happened. Man, are the higher-ups pissed at you! I certainly hope you've got a good excuse for yanking power from Yggdrasil unauthorized like that, not to mention letting a Loop collapse like it did, or they're going to crucify you. Nails and all. This better not be a request to help you hide from them. You used up all your bargaining power doing whatever it was and it's just not worth it to cover for you right now."

"I was attempting to stop a containment breach by a category 2 viral consciousness hosted in the Loop I've been trying to get active," Hephaestus replied bluntly.

"...No joking?" Hermes finally asked. "How in Tartarus did that happen?"

"It invented a device to artificially induce ascension. I didn't realize it was using the visiting Anchor as fuel until it was too late," Hephaestus replied. He could hear Hermes sit down hard.

"Oh, speed," Hermes moaned over the line. "You deal with it?"

"Managed to break it up into smaller chunks, each one only a category 4 and most native consciousnesses," Hephaestus admitted. "Turns out the damn thing was a composite." The divine smith sighed. "Look, that device it used was a partial event match to the category 1 event. No common data with the Skaia protocol. Still a huge chunk of data on the category 1 event unidentified."

"Okay," Hermes said a bit weakly. "The higher-ups might be lenient in that case. Geez, you really don't get any breaks, do you?"

"Only in my leg," Hephaestus replied with bitter humor and he heard Hermes chuckle good-naturedly. "Look, the reason I called is that I need a favor. A big one."

The god of travel sighed the sigh of one who was about to agree to something against his better judgement. "How big, man?"

"I need you to activate Sonic's baseline."

"WHAT?!" Hermes sputtered. "Do... do you have any idea what you're asking?! If Yggdrasil tries to run that without all the other branches he hits looping or otherwise stable, it could cause a serious instability collapse! Not as bad as the one you just dealt with, sure, but I'd probably have to shunt them into a safe-mode branch so I could patch their Loop back up, which will probably be *Eiken* ! You *know* I hate sending them there! And I'd just have to take it offline again anyway!"

"Listen," Hephaestus implored. "I've got a new experimental protocol set up to get my Loop functional with much higher odds than anything I've had before, but the deterioration rate per failure means that there's a good chance that if I don't get it functional *now* , it won't ever happen."

Hermes was silent, so Hephaestus took that as a sign to continue.

"The numbers weren't high enough for me to risk it as-is, so I fiddled with the scenario parameters. I can get as high as 90% possibility of successful Loop activation, but only if you have Sonic's baseline running in tandem. The natural crossing of the two will add stability to the activation attempt and your Loop shouldn't be at any greater risk than normal."

"That's a lot of assuming you're doing there," the messenger god sighed. "Look, I can't just do this on a whim. I'm gonna need to call in a fair number of favors myself to get the power needed to arrange this like you want and..." Hermes paused for a moment. "And I owe it to Sonic and his friends to tell them what you want done and let them decide if they're willing to go along with it despite the risks. If they say no, then no deal. And you will owe me big if they say yes no matter what else happens."

"I'll accept those terms," Hephaestus agreed. He'd happily accept much harsher terms, but Hermes wasn't in the habit of gouging those he didn't feel deserved it and his connection to travel made him a patron god of hospitality by default. Offering a higher payment to him would be a grave insult that Hermes would be unlikely to forgive.

"Alright, I'll be back shortly," Hermes said as he hung up.

Hephaestus waited patiently for the return call, and when he got it, he calmly picked it up and waited for Hermes to speak.

"Sonic and his pals said to 'do it to it'," Hermes half-sighed half-chuckled. "Don't know why I expected anything different. I'll get

things squared away on my end and link the final activation decision to your terminal. You won't be able to do anything until their current Loop is over, so you might as well go take your medicine from the higher-ups while you wait. If anything happens to you, I'll see that this goes through anyway. Don't worry about the higher-ups trying to stonewall this. We tricksters have ways of getting around little obstacles like that."

Hephaestus chuckled. He honestly wouldn't be surprised if the god of thieves already had copies of his office keys and login password. It wouldn't be the first time, and this time they'd be put to far better use than loading porn of his wife to his desktop. "Thank you."

"Seriously, man," Hermes offered, "good luck. Life around here wouldn't be half as much fun without you and your toys."

And with that, Hermes hung up.

Hephaestus sighed to himself and got up to go see his superiors. After a catastrophe like that, someone needed to be raked over the coals for appearances sakes, and it looked like it was his turn this time.

It actually turned out far better than he could have hoped. His data logs and offered memories about the viral consciousness and its attempt to breach universal containment went a fairly long way to explaining his actions. The proceedings and debates still took exceedingly long, years to the perception of mortals, before a decision was reached.

In the end, he was put on probation. All future decisions – he was sure he sensed Hermes' influence in that particular semantic wording – regarding his assigned Loop were to be reviewed and then approved before being undertaken until the entirety of the branch was successfully looping. In addition, he'd been assigned a trio of valkyrie interns/probation officers to watch over him. He certainly couldn't complain about that. He'd fully expected to be watched if he was allowed to go back to work and valkyries were

much preferred to the alternatives. They were almost as beautiful as his wife – and trying to suggest they were equal or better within the same plane of reality as a jealous love goddess was just inviting trouble, regardless of his personal opinions – and they had a respectable appreciation for his work as a god of the forge. Infinitely more than his wife had ever possessed or ever would.

On the way back to his office, he'd noticed the valkyries assigned to him subtly flirting with him – you picked up on this kind of thing when married to a love goddess, no matter how estranged a marriage it was – and he'd flirted back. He definitely sensed Hermes' influence in his sentencing now. No one else he knew kept trying so honestly to hook him up with a lady, or three in this case, that appreciated him for who he was rather than (loudly) lamenting the fact that he wasn't a sculpted vision of male perfection.

He got back and assigned one of the valkyries, Herfjötur, to his perpetually empty secretarial desk. One of the others, Eir, retired to a corner and appeared to go to sleep while the third, Brynhildr, followed him into his office. It wasn't a bad arrangement. Two awake at all times, one guarding the outside of the office, and the last keeping a personal eye on him. One was certainly plenty, as Hephaestus was no fighter. A valkyrie might not be quite the same power level as he was, but they could fight more than well enough to subdue a semi-crippled inventor like himself with minimal effort.

He sat down at his terminal and waited for Hermes' message. To his surprise, Brynhildr started to give him a shoulder massage.

"Just so you know," she whispered, "if you try to break probation, I and my sisters will break your other three limbs before giftwrapping you for the Justice Gods. That said, Hermes *suggested* that the best way to keep an eye on you was to make sure you didn't want to go anywhere without us."

The smith god chuckled. "Tough choice. The company of lovely capable ladies like yourselves and more help than I've ever had in the office or broken bones and arrest. I think I'll go with the former."

"Good choice," Brynhildr smirked. "Though if you behave yourself, we can probably be persuaded to a bit more than keeping you company and helping out at the office. Especially if your 'toys' are half as good as we've heard."

"You can judge the quality for yourself," Hephaestus winked. "I make everything with my own two hands and I simply won't stand for lovely ladies like yourself having anything less than the absolute best. Soon as we get my assigned Loop online, I'll get you all in for a custom armor fitting."

"We *do* love a good custom armor fitting," the saucy valkyrie winked back. "Now, Hermes mentioned that you'd arranged something with him. How fortunate that only decisions made *after* your sentencing are subject to review. Otherwise we might have a problem. I do believe that's him now."

Hephaestus looked at his screen.

MESSAGE FROM HERMES, GOD OF TRAVEL FIRST CLASS, TO HEPHAESTUS, GOD OF THE FORGE, FIRST CLASS:

Everything's taken care of. Just push the button and I'll let you know when your marker's being called in. In the meanwhile, do take some time to enjoy the company (and perhaps more) of your new companions.

Best of luck,

Hermes.

END MESSAGE

Hephaestus sighed heavily and looked back at the screen.

TANDEM RUN WITH LOOP DESIGNATED 'SONIC' AUTHORIZED BY LOOP ADMINISTRATOR HERMES.

BEGIN LOOP ACTIVATION ATTEMPT USING EXPERIMENTAL PROTOCOLS DESIGNATED 'HEPHAESTUS 1' AND OPTIMAL DETERMINED SCENARIO? Y/N

Y:\ Y

BEGINNING LOOP...

Fused Attempt) O_O

-) Hephaestus is the god I chose to be the admin of the Megaverse. As an ancient god of the forge, I believe he'd make and excellent patron god of inventors like Dr. Light and others that populate the Megaverse.

The reason no one came to haul him in front of his superiors after the Lost Loop suffered severe metaphysical collapse was that everyone was essentially running around in a panic. They would have sent someone eventually, but so long as he wasn't trying to do a runner there were more important and urgent things to worry about.

As for the valkyries liking a god who lives his life with a limp due to a poorly healed broken leg in his youth and is perpetually marred by the soot of his forgework until he's about as far from 'handsome' as you can really get for a fairly average guy (I refuse to make him deformed and ugly. Though, for the greek gods, average appearance could probably be seen as 'ugly' so it still works for his mythical origins) – where was I? Oh, yes, valkyries liking Hephaestus – that's because I see valkyries as being warriors who respect things like hard work and craftsmanship. Especially when that hard work and craftsmanship goes into making the armor and weapons they use to kick copious amounts of behind. Arrogant, and actually somewhat cowardly according to several myths, Ares doesn't float their boat. A solid hard-working amiable smith who both treats them with respect and makes superior armor and weapons, aka 'toys', is much more their preference.

Why are there three of them? One, because Hephaestus really is on probation and they're really there to watch him. They rotate who is keeping a direct eye on him, who is pulling secretary duty outside his office, and who is resting. Two, because Aphrodite (Hephaetsus's wife) is an adulterous bitch that he can't get rid of (her contribution to the Trojan war went a fair ways in influencing my view of her). Making her hit the roof because her 'unattractive' husband is turning the tables with ladies genuinely interested in him is amusing to me. Especially when those ladies also turn their noses up at her favorite lover, Ares.

The way they act is a little atypical of what could be expected of warriors. I justify this by the fact that, while valkyries are warriors with few peers, they are still female and like to be treated to pretty things just as much as the next woman. They just like their pretty things to be functional and able to survive a warzone. Think of how stereotypical women might like a boyfriend who was a master goldsmith and jeweler who made custom items just for them and you'll get their mindset regarding smith gods. In addition, Hephaestus being married to a goddess of love, even a bitch like Aphrodite, has taught Him what ladies generally like and how to treat them well.

The sort-of-friendship with Hermes? Hermes may be respected, but you know the 'god of thieves' shtick has to work against him at times. Plus he's the patron of vagabonds and other underdog travelers, so I honestly think he'd be more sympathetic to Hephaestus than a number of other members of the greek pantheon. Why is he the admin of Sonic's Loop? Hermes is also the god of speed, of course. That and the attitude I see him having meshes well with Sonic's typical demeanor.

As for Hermes' interns, they're the Ancient Walkers. The original ones who 'died' (or rather ascended according to this) in the baseline before Yggdrasil was damaged. Wise though they may be, they like to mess with others' heads as a hobby. They currently have lesser aspects (like how many gods can exist within some universes while

still fulfilling their roles running Yggdrasil) filling their former roles in Sonic's Loop.

...What is it about me that I can turn a simple author's note into a wall of text without realizing it?

Special Bonus! For those who don't care to decode the Crash Loop, here's the decoded format all ready for you:

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt using fused Loop 'jumpstart' protocols with Anchor ***ERROR*** from Loop designated '***ERROR***':

Blues was wondering what the hell was up with the world. He wanted to believe he'd finally woken up from the unending nightmare he'd been subjected to, but he didn't feel he could possibly be that lucky. As a result, he'd been staying back as much as possible and helping his family whenever he could before fading back into the shadows.

Some might say he was being completely paranoid, but that only applied if the universe wasn't out to get you, and Blues would need a lot more convincing before he believed that.

Everything was different from how he somehow knew it was supposed to be. There seemed to be no Dr. Wily fomenting robot revolutions. Instead, there was a mysterious organization calling itself Dark Sigma that was doing it instead, each of its major agents going by a 'model' designation plus a letter, with minor agents getting 'model' plus a number, and never identifying their leader as anything other than 'Model W'.

They'd started out as human agents who hacked into robot command relays, but they'd been easily rounded up by Dr. Light's industrial robot masters led by Rock and Roll. Only afterwards were any of the agents robot masters themselves.

Robot masters that had been subverted by Dr. Wily in the original timeline he remembered – even when the world didn't – had proven to be formidable allies this time. Dr. Cossack and his line of robot masters had been instrumental in turning back the assault of the immensely powerful 'Model R', also known to him as Ra Thor, and the sociopathic alien supercomputer that backed it up. The World Robot Tournament contestants had been all too willing to help fight back 'Model D', a human known as Reverend Dark turned robot that he recognized as Dark Man; 'Model K', the King of Robots; and 'Model B', once known to him as Bass and Treble; along with their various lieutenants.

Later, everyone had needed to band together to turn back the immensely powerful 'Model T', who was clearly a version of the alien robot Terra from his memories, and his ridiculously powerful stardroids. But the most devastating had been the hellish pair known only as 'Model Z' and 'Model X' – the latter looking disturbingly like a more mature Rock in some respects – and it had taken the lives of numerous allied robot masters before they fell. Some of the IC chips of the fallen had been completely destroyed.

More interesting was how his brother and sister were acting.

Rock seemed perpetually confused. He weathered the stress of war much better than Blues recalled, and the only things that threw him off were the more mundane instances that Blues knew to be radically different from the original timeline.

Roll on the other hand was perpetually jumpy, like she expected an attack from any source at any time. But unlike Blues himself, she didn't seem frightened for herself, but for others. Everywhere she went, she subtly positioned herself between others and potential threats, with the one given priority being Rock. She seemed convinced that if she didn't have his back at all times he would be killed by a surprise attack, and thus anything that tried to hurt her brother was eliminated with extreme prejudice.

He dared to hope that they remembered things that happened before as well, but his memories of the nightmare he'd experienced between the original timeline and now held him back. The horrors he might suffer were he wrong bound him more thoroughly than his jealousy and pride ever had.

But the one thing that captured everyone's interest was a human named ***ERROR*** that would normally not have been given a second glance. They were a fairly average individual and an intern at the Cronos Institute. Not particularly valuable a target, especially given the more senior and lauded members at the Chronos Institute, but they were involved in every single attack and seemed to be a priority target for Dark Sigma.

Blues had no memory of this human from the original timeline, but he *knew* , somehow, that the intern was vitally important.

Which made the fact that they'd just been kidnapped by some Boba Fett wannabe called 'Model V' especially worrying.

He'd followed his siblings as they tracked the kidnapper to what looked like a large warehouse, determined to back them up while their other allies were suppressing the attacks elsewhere meant to smokescreen the kidnapping. He hid in the rafters and waited for his moment while Rock and Roll confronted the vile Model V.

Model V's primary weapon seemed to be a shoulder-mounted cannon, and while it was an atypical design the weapon was immensely powerful and the robot's purple armor and other physical abilities were clearly in the same class as the hellish duo Model Z and Model X.

But his brother and sister were no slouches themselves, and they'd learned plenty fighting the aforementioned robots. Model V might be faster, stronger, and tougher, but he had nowhere near his sibling's combat experience or skill and it showed.

Unfortunately, a lucky blow had stunned Roll and a well-timed grab had immobilized Rock. Model V was now charging up his shoulder cannon for a point-blank shot that would surely kill his brother.

Blues knew the time to act was now.

A precision sniper-shot to the helmet got Model V's attention nicely and Rock took full advantage of the distraction. He brought his arm cannon up in a manner that would put quickdraw artists to shame and fired his own charged shot.

Straight down the barrel of Model V's shoulder-mounted cannon.

The explosion took Model V's arm off at the shoulder and hurled Rock back several meters from the force. It looked as if Model V would recover before Rock did, but unluckily for him, Roll wouldn't allow him the advantage. The Crash Bomb she fired hit perfectly on the damaged portion of Model V's torso, and the explosion decimated the delicate internal systems that were now unprotected by armor.

The sound of slow applause filled the warehouse.

"Excellent," a voice said and Blues froze in horror. He didn't hear the following statement at all. He was too lost in a terrible memory where Dr. Light was acting... not like Dr. Light. The not-Dr. Light had said that very word in that very voice. He hadn't been able to place the voice then.

But he did now.

Further musings were cut off as he was pumped full of electrical voltage and plummeted from his position in the rafters as a result. He fell, and kept falling past where the floor should have been. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was the far-away scene of the warehouse roof as a shadow closed ominously below it.

When Blues came to, he knew he was restrained. His arms and legs were bound in an 'X' formation and impossible to move. Opening his eyes, he saw that his brother and sister were similarly bound. Their placement around the room formed a triangle, each of them facing the center where the human intern ***ERROR*** dangled from the ceiling. Taking a look around, Blues realized they were all hooked up to a giant machine, their bindings part of some sort of circuit.

The purpose of it was beyond his experience, but Blues was willing to bet everything that it wasn't good.

"Welcome," the voice from before stated, no longer sounding like it was broadcasted. The owner of the voice was in this room. "Welcome to the headquarters of my little organization. I am so glad that you all could finally join me."

Blues shivered at the familiar voice and looked towards the figure as he stepped into the light. He was different. He had what looked like a small red gem in the middle of his forehead, his hair seemed more blue than the expected gray, his eyes were hidden behind a pair of angular shades that still failed to hide how crazed his expression was, he was dressed more finely than Blues remembered, and he had a skull-topped cane that was clearly for appearances only, but still Blues could never have mistaken him for anyone else.

"Yes, it is I, Model W, the leader of Dark Sigma, the Regal King, Dr. ALBERT! *WEIL!* ***WILY!*** "

The expressions of the four captives were vastly different. ***ERROR*** clearly had no idea who his captor was, Rock was characteristically defiant, Roll was surprisingly murderous, and Blues?

Blues was scared out of his mind.

Not only was this the owner of the voice that haunted his nightmares, there was a definitive feeling of... *wrongness* about the mad doctor. Whether he was the same Dr. Wily as the original timeline didn't

matter. All Blues was certain of was that this version of the man *wasn't supposed to exist* .

They were all in very real danger.

"Oh, it was quite the puzzle on how to get what I needed, but lo and behold, the three of you had it all along!" Wily cackled.

"And this boy..." he continued, a sinister grin splitting his face. "Why this boy is the very key to my escape from this universal prison. This infinity of repeating time."

ERROR's eyes widened as they slowly turned to stare at the doctor in horror.

"Oh, yes," Wily chuckled. "I know all about that. And I knew, the moment you came into my territory, that you were the key to my escape. My key to becoming the master of all creation! Why do you think I have spent so much effort on capturing a nobody like yourself? The indescribable essence that allows you to retain awareness and ability as time repeats itself is what I need."

ERROR pleaded something back at the doctor that Blues couldn't quite make out.

"Oh, but I *can* ," Wily sneered. "What do I care if your entire universe is erased as a result? My destiny awaits you pathetic fool!"

Wily turned sharply and strode to a control panel. "No more meaningless prattle! We begin immediately!" And with that, Wily threw a switch.

Energy hummed, and a strain that Blues couldn't remember feeling before, but yet recognized permeated everything. It was like the strain felt right before one of his nightmare lives had abruptly ended. He hadn't noticed the feeling those times, but experiencing it now, he somehow knew that it had happened. What was happening now was the same thing, only far greater.

The energy reached a pitch and suddenly his brother spasmed like he'd been impaled on something. The straining feeling jumped in intensity at the same time and didn't lessen. The energy rose in pitch again and the same thing happened with his sister, her face frozen in pain as the feeling of strain nearly doubled in intensity.

The energy rose once again, and Blues struggles, knowing he was next. Even then, he wasn't prepared for what he would swear was the feeling of a rod of utter wrongness being rammed straight through his soul.

The energy crackled madly, matching the doctor, as it began to probe ***ERROR***. Each zap and spark that touched them set off a scream of agony like they were being ripped apart, and Blues was certain that in some way, they were.

The feeling of strain was practically screaming now, and Blues suddenly knew what it was. *Reality didn't like what was happening.* It didn't like it one bit, and it was attempting to fight back against the unnatural thing the doctor was attempting.

The energy of the machine began to rise in pitch until it too was screaming, and Wily suddenly looked uncertain. Like the resistance to his machine wasn't planned for. He began to rant and rail something, until a stray bolt of energy from the machine struck him. And then Wily himself began screaming.

The screams of Wily, ***ERROR***, the machine, and reality itself mingled until they couldn't be differentiated from each other.

Blues knew that, eventually, something had to give.

And then something did.

CRASH

Loop 1 Part 1: Once More, From the Top

Mega Loop 1.0 - Part 1: Once More, From the Top

Yggdrasil Log: Loop activation attempt 1 using experimental procedure:

"NO! –" Rock's protest died on his lips as he blinked. He'd been about to call out a name, except he hit an error when trying to actually speak it. He remembered there was... someone who was being hurt. Badly. But for the life of him, the name wouldn't come. He checked his memory, revealing multiple lifetimes worth of memory errors so clear he would have almost sworn they were multiple lifetimes worth of actual memories. (1)

But the last one... The last one had this gaping person-shaped hole in it. Rock could remember everything around this person clearly, but the person themselves? It was like they hadn't actually existed. Rock couldn't recall their appearance, age, voice, what they wore, or even their gender.

Roll came into his room and looked at him oddly.

"Sorry, Roll," he said sheepishly. "Bad... dream? I think? Dad never said if we could. But there was... someone being hurt and I was trying to call their name, but it's not actually in my memory banks. Weird, huh?"

Roll's eyes widened, and Rock thought she might actually be shaking a little. "You too?"

"Huh?" Rock blinked in confusion.

"You..." Roll shook visibly, "remember a life where there... used to be a person, but now there's a..."

"Hole?" Rock offered, not daring to believe what he was hearing. "You..."

"I'm so sorry!" Roll tackled her brother in a weeping hug. "I couldn't protect you! I couldn't save you fro–"

"Whoa! Whoa!" Rock raised his hands in a 'stop' gesture. "Protect me from what? People and robots being in the wrong places? Musically talented robot masters? The world generally crashing because of weirdness?"

Roll opened her mouth, and then closed it. She released her brother and took a moment to center herself. "From dying, you idiot."

Now it was Rock's turn to repeat his sister's gesture. "I... don't recall dying. I came close a few times, but no closer than usual. Mostly it was just weirdness. Like existing as a video game and chasing Wily out into the 'real world' and then listening to him boast about being a ninja."

"I had a few like that," Roll admitted. "The first time, I somehow ended up in a fight with Cut Man and I tried to shoot him with a toaster. Then I was somewhere that had a personal vendetta against my clothes. After that we were all on Hawaii instead of here and I dressed like a hula girl 24/7 and never wondered why until right at the end. The time after that, I watched Wily march on the city with your head on a pike."

"Oh," was all Rock could say.

"It just kept getting worse. Instead of Xander, I ended up fighting some religious fanatic who worshipped robots as living gods and had his brain surgically extracted into Dark Man. I failed to protect an entire concert when Wily reprogrammed the band to slaughter them. I watched Terra murder you. And then there was Waltz..." Roll shuddered and Rock decided not to ask about it.

"Is that why you were so protective of me that last time?" Rock asked instead, getting a nod.

"I'm never letting you fight alone again," Roll stated vehemently. "I could never live with myself if I stood on the sidelines while you got hurt because I didn't act."

Rock sat silently for a minute. Even discounting the madness he'd lived through, multiple times it seemed, he'd never wish this kind of life on anyone. But Roll had apparently been thrust into it anyway, and he had to admit that Roll had saved his life a number of times the last go-round. She was every bit as capable as he'd ever been.

"Then I guess I'll rock," he offered his hand to his sister.

She grasped it firmly in a warrior's handshake, grinning at his offered pun. "And I'll roll."

Dr. Light stared at both of his children in astonishment. "You're both sure?"

Rock and Roll nodded in unison.

"Neither of us want to hurt anyone, human or robot," Rock told their father. "But it seems like Dr. Wily doesn't feel the same way."

"We'd prefer a peaceful solution," Roll continued, "but I don't think there is one."

"We know you don't want to build fighting robots anymore," Rock picked up, "and if we can get the others to stop without fighting we will. But–"

"If we have to fight," Roll finished, "then we have to fight."

Dr. Light sighed heavily, his expression going a little odd at their united speech.

"You're right," the scientist replied with a bit of confusion in his voice. "You're both absolutely right."

The city was in flames and both Rock and Roll, along with Elec Man and their new friends Tempo and Pharaoh Man, were too occupied rescuing people from the blaze to do anything about the source.

Somehow, both Xander Payne's anti-robot terrorist group, the Emerald Spears, and Reverend Dark's fanatical robot-worshipping cult had shown up at the robot expo. The speed at which the city effectively became a war zone rivaled anything Dr. Wily had pulled in *any* of their lives. (2)

"Blues!" the joint cry caused the red robot to stop in his tracks.

He'd been in an impossible position. He'd needed his energy core repaired if he wanted to continue living, and the only two he knew could do it he couldn't bring himself to trust. So he'd stopped thinking about it and just let himself walk.

He'd ended up at the Lanfront ruins. Again.

Where Dr. Wily patched him up and upgraded his systems. Again.

And no alterations to his mind.

It seemed his subconscious knew who was more trustworthy to repair him. So why did it hurt so much?

"Do you..." Roll, in yellow armor like her brothers', except molded for a female frame, looked hopeful.

"Do you remember a life where there was a person-shaped hole?" Rock finished for her.

Blues blinked behind his full-face mask. "Yes," he admitted reluctantly. He was only mildly surprised that the two of them remembered it as well.

"Do you remember any lifetimes before then?" Roll asked eagerly. "Rock and I have two completely different sets of me–"

Far easier to remove the unnecessary subroutines...

"I don't want to talk about it," Blues cut her off rudely. (3)

Hephaestus was distracted from observing the Loop activation attempt by a tone from his intercom.

"Hermes and company here to see you, sir," Herfjötur's voice called to him. Blast it all.

"Better go see what he wants," Brynhildr said from where she sat next to him. "No telling what a Trickster will get up to if you leave them to their own devices for too long."

That got him moving a little faster. He didn't want his office repainted in some garish color scheme that his wife thought was 'in' lately. And he knew that Hermes was fully capable of doing it right under his nose.

He entered the outer office, and saw Hermes with a pair of nymphs who seemed to be dressed in nurses' uniforms. Hermes was a patron of doctors and would never profane the profession, even for a gag. Which meant the nymphs had to actually be trained as nurses.

"Hermes," Hephaestus pinched the bridge of his nose, "how long have you been training nymphs as nursing staff? And why have you brought two to my office?"

"Longer than anyone thinks," Eir said from her spot napping by the wall.

"Traveler's rule 65: Never upstage a decent host," Hermes smirked.

Hephaestus facepalmed as the valkyries roared with laughter. Hermes had pretty much just said that he'd brought *only* two nymphs because Hephaestus was personally hosting three valkyries. He was about to fire back a cutting remark when he caught a familiar smell.

"Hermes..." he growled dangerously.

"We brought popcorn!" the god of travel grinned, pulling out a full subspace bowl of the foodstuff.

"Did you use my forge to make that?"

"Duh," Hermes rolled his eyes. "How *else* was I supposed to get the most divine smokey flavor in all of creation?"

Hephaestus caught himself halfway to an angry retort. He'd used his forge for cooking more than once, and it did give the food an amazing smokey flavor. "Huh... Good point."

"I thought so," Hermes grinned. "Anyway, we're here to watch the activation attempt with you. I even brought my remote terminal in case something goes wrong."

"What makes you think anything will go wrong?" Hephaestus asked, curiosity edging out the challenge in his voice.

"Your track record," Hermes returned bluntly. (4)

Hephaestus winced and acknowledged the point. His bad luck was almost as legendary as his smithy skills. It was the reason he'd sworn never to gamble.

"Anyway, why don't you invite the rest of your ladies to join us and we'll make a party of it," Hermes suggested. "Not like you haven't gone without an active secretary before and the more the merrier."

And with that, everyone had filed in and arranged themselves a bit cozily, not that anyone seemed to complain, to observe the proceedings.

"You have all three of them active?" Hermes raised an eyebrow. Hephaestus knew he wasn't referring to the valkyries. "You realize how risky that is, right?"

"Better than most," Hephaestus admitted, "but I'm not exactly swimming in options here."

"Well," Hermes offered the god of the forge some popcorn, "here's hoping it works."

"Thanks."

Roll wasn't entirely sure how it had happened, but instead of her lying about to die from Ra Moon's EMP wave, it was Tempo. Blues hadn't crashed the dedication ceremony of Mega City – this time jointly for both Mega Man (her brother) and Mega Woman (herself) – but the Emerald Spears *had* .

The result had been utter chaos, and both she and Rock had their hands full trying to get everyone to safety when she'd heard Dr. Lalinde scream out Tempo's name. She hadn't even known the two were still in town, but Tempo had a smoking hole in her back and looked like she'd taken a shot meant for Dr. Lalinde, the shooter nowhere to be seen.

And then the EMP had hit and she'd blacked out.

She'd heard later that the Emerald Spears had fled when Blues, once again immune to the global EMP field, showed up and showed no compunction about firing on them if they didn't hightail it out of there. It didn't stop the Emerald Spears from running around the city afterwards claiming that the event was divine providence in favor of

their cause, but it had probably saved a lot of people's lives, including hers.

After she, Rock, Guts Man, Cut Man, Bomb Man, Rush, and Tango had been treated with something that could block Ra Moon's EMP field, they'd gone to the Lanfront Ruins. Once there, Blues had intervened on their behalf with Dr. Wily's first set of original robot masters and enlisted their aid rather than she, Rock, and Dr. Light's robot masters having to fight them first. It had still taken them time to work their way towards Ra Moon's lair, battling with the mind-controlled second set of Dr. Wily's robot masters along the way, and the chaos of the ensuing melee was nothing short of total.

Dr. Wily himself had shown up with Ra Thor, who Ra Moon promptly took control of, and when Ra Moon declared it was done 'playing' with them and shut off Dr. Wily's loyal robot masters, Roll simply lost it.

She'd managed to fuel up on a number of weapons from all sets of robot masters in preparation of this fight and she'd unloaded *all* of them on Ra Thor. It had barely been enough.

But, of course, Ra Moon couldn't leave it at that. It had to create its own version of the Yellow Devil and set it on them. She'd been too exhausted to dodge its eye-laser and had been blasted into the wall. That had set Rock off, and he was doing his best to obliterate the Ra Devil despite its personal protective energy field while Blues and the remaining Light robot masters held off Ra Moon's remaining forces.

It was then that a ragged and worn-out Dr. Wily had worked his way over to her.

"Dr. Wily?" she asked groggily.

"There's no time!" the doctor whispered frantically. "Please listen closely! Ra Moon has tipped his hand! Rock's made several direct hits to the control eye of Ra Devil, and they all should have done *something* , but there's been no effect at all. That tells me that Ra

Moon is *directly* powering Ra Devil! The energy protecting Ra Devil from harm is energy Ra Moon cannot use to protect itself! His defenses can now be breached!"

"So..." Roll gathered her thoughts and tried to remember how Rock had told her this went in their original life. "Let Rock keep Ra Devil busy while I line up a shot at Ra Moon."

"Yes!" Dr. Wily hissed. "You'll likely only get one shot, so you *cannot* miss or Ra Moon will crush us all personally!"

"Right," she replied as she shifted both arms to cannon mode. "I'm gonna need to time this just right."

"T-two...?" Dr. Wily stuttered in confusion. "But your power matrix can't support two Mega Buster Cannons!"

The image of Tempo lying where she would have been otherwise crossed her mind. "I'm aware of that."

"Your body wasn't built for that kind of output! You'll tear yourself to shreds!"

"I'm aware of that," Roll let a tear slide down her face as she remembered the state Rock had been after this in the original timeline.

"You–"

"Dr. Wily..." Roll interrupted. "If there's anything left of me that can be repaired... If my IC chip is still intact... Take it back to Dr. Light."

She took a deep breath and centered herself, feeling the charge build up in both arms. Almost ready.

"And tell my brothers I'm sorry."

She waited until a flash from Ra Devil's laser obscured visibility before leaping to her feet and firing at Ra Moon with both barrels.

She felt her arms shatter from the overload, but as she fell to the sound of Ra Moon's death cry, she couldn't help but smile. (5)

"She's okay," Hephaestus let out a sigh of relief. "They got her repaired."

Hermes wiped some sweat from his forehead as well. Death by in-loop events wasn't generally a problem for Anchors, but having one die prematurely during an activation attempt, especially one *this* critical? That would be bad (6). And since all the threats so far faced were native to the universe, and of no danger to anything outside it, they were expressly forbidden from interfering.

Of course, that wasn't the only thing on Hermes' mind right now.

"You know, I was certain that the cross with Sonic's Loop would have happened by now..."

"If I was willing to accept a 10% drop in activation success, it would have," Hephaestus replied sardonically.

Hermes winced. A 1 in 5 chance of failure versus a 1 in 10 chance of failure? Yeah, he knew which option he'd choose too.

"I arranged the tandem scenario so they'll cross later in Rock's timeline," Hephaestus continued, "when Dr. Wily has no reason to rewrite the timeline to a later point in order to gain access to his full army."

Ah, that *would* put a fair strain on the system during a Loop activation. Especially when the Loop in question was barely holding together as it was.

Roll found her brother brooding in an empty room of the lab. "Rock? Are you okay? Look, I'm sorry about what happened with Ra Moon, but–"

"It's not that," Rock interrupted.

"Huh?" Roll blinked.

"Roll, I won't lie to you," Rock admitted. "You scared the heck out of me when you nearly killed yourself taking out Ra Moon, but I knew the risks you were taking when you signed up to fight as well. After all, they're the same risks I've taken every life I've lived and I accepted the fact that you'll be taking them as well this time. And that you've been taking them for a while already. I'm good with that."

"Then," Roll digested all that for a moment, "what's got you so worked up?"

Rock sighed. "You remember the robot expo? The one where the Emerald Spears and the Church of Robotic Superiority tried to kill each other?"

Roll gave her brother a flat look. "Who could possibly forget?"

"Well," Rock rubbed his head sheepishly at his sister's retort, "before they started shooting, I was trying to think of a way to stop them from hurting anyone and I realized something."

"What?"

"There wasn't anything stopping me from hurting them first," he admitted. "Our safeguards against harming lifeforms, the 'first law of robotics', weren't there anymore. I was so shocked that I missed it when they started shooting at each other. I checked my coding, and found the other 'laws' were also gone. I don't have to obey anyone, even Dr. Light, and there's nothing stopping me from self-terminating aside from my personal desire to live."

"Are you sure?" Roll looked apprehensive. "How could that be possible?"

"I don't know how it's possible, but it's true," Rock stated morosely. "I-I actually have full Free Will. You and Blues probably do too. I have no idea what's happening to us."

"I–" Roll wanted to state that she didn't believe it, but some part of her was insisting that it was the truth. "I have to test this."

Roll ran from the room before her brother could say anything to stop her. She found Dr. Light very quickly and ran to him.

"Dr. Light!" she called, grabbing him firmly by the hand and began tugging. "I think there's something wrong!"

"Ow," Dr. Light muttered as his daughter gripped a little tighter and tugged just a little harder than was comfortable for him. "Roll, calm down! What's the matter?"

The grip just tightened as Roll tugged even harder.

"Ah!" the scientist gasped as he felt something bruise slightly. "Roll! Let go! I can't help you if you injure me by accident!"

The grip got even tighter and the tugging even harder.

"ROLL!" Dr. Light yelped as it felt like the bones in his hand were about to crack, and he was suddenly released.

Roll took several steps back, staring blankly at the bruised hand of her father.

Dr. Light rubbed his sore hand as he looked at his daughter. He suddenly realized that she looked very scared of something.

"Roll?" he asked with concern, the pain in his hand forgotten. All that mattered to him right now was soothing whatever was causing his daughter such anguish. "Is everything alright?"

"Good," Hephaestus nodded to himself. "They're getting this out of the way now. Best to discover this new trait about themselves sooner rather than later."

"How exactly did you pull this off?" Hermes asked. "I thought only sapient, free willed entities with completely realized souls could even be considered for looping."

"Technically, I didn't," Hephaestus admitted. "Yggdrasil did. Somewhere in the branch are versions of those three who fit that description and are part of the greater identity code used to generate Loop memories, so Yggdrasil brought that code to full prominence in their individual core coding to ensure that such will always be the case when they Loop."

Dr. Light looked at his children with kindness and understanding. What they had told him was beyond belief, but it was also very clearly true. His children had true and honest Free Will, and they were scared to death of the implications.

"It'll be alright," he said.

"But Dr. Light!" Rock insisted. "We can hurt people now! We're a danger to everyone around us! It's not safe to keep us active and–"

Dr. Light cut Rock off with a simple raise of his hand. "Rock, every human being alive is a potential danger to others. We can all choose to do harm to each other as easily as we can choose anything else in our lives. But yet almost all of us are capable of living without becoming a danger to anyone around us, because we have learned moral behavior. Just like the two of you have."

He drew them both into a hug, ignoring the bruising on his hand where Roll had gripped him to test the truth of her Free Will. He couldn't fault her for that. He was a scientist, and knew the importance of testing hypotheses, and despite her design, Roll was

very much his daughter. Of course she would need verification before she trusted the revelation.

"But I hurt you!" Roll cried. "And I didn't stop even when I knew you were in pain!"

"Roll," Dr. Light comforted his children, "I would have gladly born this pain a thousand times over if it meant I could ease the pain of my children by even the slightest amount. You are the ones who are hurting the most right now, not me."

His words were the honest truth, and he hoped that his children understood that.

"I remember a movie in my youth," Dr. Light told them. "Assuming I recall it correctly, one of the characters said to another that 'after you live your whole life in a cage, the whole world can seem like a very big place'. That is what you are feeling now. You have been let out of the cage formed by the 'laws of robotics' and given true freedom for the first time in your lives. It is amazing, wonderful, and miraculous. But it is also very terrifying." (7)

Roll sniffed. "But, it's too much! How can we deal with this?"

"One day at a time, Roll," Dr. Light answered. "That's all you can do with much of life I'm afraid. Understand that the enormity of Free Will can overwhelm even humans, who have had their entire lives to get used to it. The prospect of being able to choose anything is simply too vast at times to contemplate."

Dr. Light waited for a moment while his children digested this.

"But we have learned to adapt and live with it," he told them. "It is a part of who we are, and now it is a part of who you are, even if I never understand how it came about. You have the power to choose now my children, and no greater power has ever been granted to anyone."

"But," Rock protested, "what if we choose wrong?"

"Then you learn," Dr. Light told him, "and choose better the next time. I have faith in you both."

"Hey, Rock?" Roll called to her brother. This set of robot masters was... odd in a way she couldn't put her finger on. The nine robot masters and the one they supposedly served – and she hadn't yet discounted the idea that Wily was behind everything – hadn't happened in any of her weird lives. The original timeline on the other hand... She couldn't really recall them in it, but she also couldn't quite shake the idea that they'd been there. "Do you remember these guys and their master CRORQ from the original timeline?"

Rock started to answer her, only to get a look of confusion on his own face.

"You know... I'm not sure...?" (8)

"Because of you, we *have* to be," the green armored robot with the blue shades, yellow eyebrow-horns, and the jackhammer/pogo-stick from hell declared. "Without you two, there is no us. Let the time stream figure out the rest."

"Aw," giggled the tanned female robot in the dark navy and cream armor – complete with neon pink 'W' on the helmet – next to him, "don't be so melodramatic Quint! Stop pretending like we're them from the future! You know that's just to mess with their heads! And they're clearly not buying it, so why don't we get on with things and kill them messily? It'll be so much fun!"

Quint scowled at his companion. "Cease your inane prattle Waltz. We were reprogrammed to serve Dr. Wily faithfully and that is what we will do."

Waltz ignored him and turned towards their opponents. "See what I have to deal with? How can I get on with lovely, sweet murder when I'm saddled with such a killjoy?"

Rock just turned to his sister, who had been shaking ever so slightly since they'd walked through the door to see Dr. Wily's little duo. "You okay?" he whispered.

"I'll be fine," she whispered back. "Just need to calm myself."

"Tell you what..." Rock offered. "Why don't we switch partners this time? They're clearly each designed to get under our skins, so let's shake *them* up instead."

"Rock, you don't understand what she's like..." Roll started.

"I know she hurt my sister badly enough to–" Rock was cut off by an energy blast that forced him and Roll to jump away from each other.

"Quiet talky time is over!" Waltz grinned maniacally as she charged for Roll. "Happy fun killing time has begun!"

"Come, Sakugarne!" cried Quint as he hopped on his support unit and leapt high into the air so he could rain energy down on Rock.

Rock wasn't having any of this. He ignored Quint and cut across the room to intercept Waltz with a punch to the face that sent her skidding across the floor.

"Roll!" he yelled to his sister. "Keep Quint busy while I deal with her!"

Roll only nodded and turned to face Quint, who seemed confused.

"This..." Quint's face contorted in bafflement. "This isn't how this goes..."

"Rock and I aren't slaves to Fate," Roll retorted, readying her broom-staff that Dr. Light had made for her recently.

Across the room, Waltz was throwing a fit.

"No! Nononononono! You don't do that!" she screamed as she fired rapid shots from her finger cannons at her unexpected foe. "You don't hit me! I shoot up your sister while Quint carves you to pieces! That's how this wo–" a buster shot to the face cut her off.

"I'm changing the rules," Rock told her.

Waltz, half her face missing from the blast, charged at Rock while screaming incoherently. (9)

The ladies had stuck around for a while at the beginning, but as Hephaestus and Hermes began talking shop regarding the happenings in the activation attempt before them, they began drifting in and out and chatting amongst themselves.

That wasn't what was happening right now.

The nymphs Hermes had brought with him were hiding behind Hephaestus's desk while the valkyries were all out in the outer office trying to get rid of an unwanted visitor. A visitor known as Aphrodite, wife of Hephaestus and the one individual he hated more than any other.

The facts of their very final breakup were a bit sketchy, but it was known that after millennia of Hephaestus forging himself into a lover that Aphrodite could declare worthy, he'd realized that it would never be good enough. Aphrodite could never see past his average looks, imperfect form, or unromantic trade. Nor would she ever admit that the concept of Love and romance she championed could realistically continue to exist between a married couple. In short, he could become a better lover than all of the love gods combined, and she would still never be satisfied.

When he realized this, the passion that he'd kept burning for his lovely wife for so long had turned into a smoldering hate.

But, of course, Aphrodite wouldn't stand for her husband telling her that he despised her and never wanted to see her again.

When Hephaestus tried to break it off with Aphrodite, the Wrath of a Love Turned to Hate had clashed with the Fury of a Woman Scorned, and the latter had been knocked flat on its arse.

Too bad Aphrodite was never one to accept a lesson she didn't like.

She'd been looking for ways to browbeat her husband ever since, and Hermes had taken it upon himself to try and thwart them as best he could. The valkyries were his latest scheme, and something of a desperation gambit. Aphrodite may fight dirty, but her attitude made her no friends among the female warriors of the divine realm. And these female warriors were under the protection of the Aesir, a pantheon that had absolutely no fear of the Olympians. The valkyries would happily take any excuse to twist Aphrodite into a pretzel, goddess first class or no.

Hermes respected Hephaestus, and knew that he didn't deserve what would happen if he had another confrontation with his wife. She was bound and determined to browbeat her husband until he snapped completely, forgetting that underneath the Smith was a Force of Nature.

And causing volcano gods to snap *never* ended well.

As much as Aphrodite might deserve such a fate, Hermes didn't want to see his friend hauled in front of the Justice Gods for murdering his wife (10). And so, he was determined to keep Hephaestus distracted.

"What's up with Quint's code?" he asked, casually ignoring the muffled harridan screeches coming through the door.

"Quint got flagged by Yggdrasil as a severe Paradox risk," Hephaestus replied, clearly grateful for something else to focus on.

"His greater code was a bit of a mess, with almost half of the known instances being a legitimate future version of Rock himself."

Hermes winced at the implications of that. (11)

"Obviously we can't have multiple yet distinct instances of a potential Anchor or looper from different periods of the timeline running around regularly," the smith god explained, "especially fighting each other to the death, so Quint's code needed to be adjusted. He still has some code that will rarely manifest him as a future version of Rock from an alternate timeline, but the rest of his original code is a clone of Rock made with technology from the future and merely programmed to *think* he's a future version of Rock. It helped that I stabilized his remaining code by combining it with the code from a Mega Man Shadow who is similar enough to Quint that their codes already overlapped significantly."

"How about that Waltz character," Hermes continued as sounds of a scuffle were heard through the door. "What's her story? Her code seems a little... viral."

Hephaestus winced. "It *is* viral, but I can't fix it. When Roll took her brother's place as the hero in the attempts to Anchor through her, Yggdrasil reconciled some of her brother's main battles a little differently. It couldn't activate a version of Quint as her future counterpart since she isn't her brother, so it searched deep into the variants for some code it could use in place of Quint and found Waltz. Her code is definitely infected, but it's also corrupted enough that I can't tell where the virus ends and she begins. And Yggdrasil insists on using her as Roll's future counterpart for some reason. It's really quite maddening."

The door to the outer office opened and Eir strode in, dusting her hands off. "Sorry for leaving so suddenly like that. Needed to take the trash out. I left the others guarding the door to prevent further interruptions."

"Thank you," Hephaestus replied, clearly grateful.

It had been a very long year, Blues thought to himself.

After the incident at the Chronos Institute, it had looked like things were settling down, but Blues knew better. He'd made friends with the Cossacks and tried to head off Kalinka's kidnapping only to fail. At his advice, Dr. Cossack had instructed his robot masters to use no lethal force and fight to delay Rock and Roll only.

Even with his knowledge of the original timeline, he had barely managed to rescue Kalinka in time to stop her father from doing something drastic.

After that, Reverend Dark had apparently had his brain installed in Dark Man (Blues still shuddered at the disturbing concept) and tried to frame Blues for setting the latest invasion of robot masters on the world. Too bad for him that Blues had been hanging out in a coffee shop near city hall with his brother and sister when the man's live broadcast came on, so all sorts of witnesses, up to and including Mayor L. Dorado, vouched for him.

It was shortly after that incident had been resolved – Dr. Wily behind everything again – that Dr. Cossack had called him and asked him to stop by. It was something he didn't recall happening at all in the original timeline, and Blues had to admit to being intrigued enough to humor the man.

"Ah, welcome Blues!" the Russian scientist proclaimed as the robot in question entered the lab. "Right on time! I just put the finishing touches on Beat here."

'Beat?' Blues wondered. Sure, he knew that Dr. Cossack had developed the bird robot jointly with Dr. Light, but the bird belonged to his brother. Didn't it?

"I'm glad you came," Dr. Cossack continued. "It would have been a shame if we couldn't get Beat here registered to you. Again."

Blues blinked in surprise, though the motion was thankfully hidden behind his shades.

"Oh, yes," Dr. Cossack chuckled, somehow sensing the robot's surprise anyway, "Beat was always meant to be your companion instead of your brother's. But, sadly, you never stuck around long enough for me to give him to you. It saddens me that the one I owe everything to for saving my daughter's life has never allowed me to present him with proper thanks."

Blues wanted to apologize, but what he found himself saying instead was: "You were saying something about finishing touches?"

"Yes," Dr. Cossack replied good naturedly. "Dr. Light sent me some notes about upgrades he was giving to the companions of your siblings, and in the nature of competitive robotics scientists such as us, I simply couldn't let myself be outdone. Although, I unfortunately missed the chance to name the type of upgrades I installed. But, come, come! Let us get Beat registered to you and get your upgrades installed so you can take full advantage of Beat's."

Blues allowed the Russian doctor to work on him, but only if he remained conscious for the process. It was paranoid, he was certain, since Mikhail Cossack was the only doctor he currently believed to be fully trustworthy, but it was also the only way he could go through with it and not suffer a panic attack. In short order, the upgrades were installed and Beat was registered as his companion support unit.

"Now," Dr. Cossack rubbed his hands in anticipation, "please activate Beat's super adaptor."

"Beat," Blues commanded. "Super adaptor."

Beat's flew towards Blues and his body shifted around the larger robot, forming torso armor over Blues's normal armor. Blues could feel the flight systems now on his back and the unique weapons data that came with it. He opened his eyes and looked into a mirror the

doctor had set up so he could observe himself and found a blue and white-armored Proto Man–

After all, I'm the latest model. New and improved in every way. The son Dr. Light really wanted all along.

–staring right back at him.

"There's also a special weapon attachment for your buster," Dr. Cossack continued. "Just reach the barrel over your shoulder to your back to connect it."

Blues did so and when he brought his buster back around, it looked like it had Beat's beak attached to the end. He ran some energy through it, and was only mildly surprised to see a solid sword blade materialize from the weapon. It might be larger than the Rolling Cutter or Metal Blade, but the principles of its formation were the same.

"Like it?" Cossack grinned and adjusted his glasses. "You already had the shield, and Kalinka's been calling you her 'knight in shining armor' ever since you saved her. I thought you should perhaps look the part."

Blues tested the heft and feel of the weapon. The way it cut through the air with ease. He smiled.

"It's perfect." (12)

"Are the cat ears on her helmet intentional?" Rock inquired curiously as he took in Roll and Tango's super adaptor form. Green and white actually wasn't a bad look for Roll, and the claws on her fingertips seemed somehow fitting.

"Not... entirely," Dr. Light admitted. "Sometimes I zone out a bit when designing, and end up including some rather interesting extras. What do you think, Roll?"

Roll had been examining herself over, and noted that her current super adaptor mode with Tango was a little different than the one that had been designed for her in her solo lives. However, she felt like the differences were pleasant improvements rather than detractions. For one, she felt a little less like a female copy of her brother in it.

"I love it! Nyah!" Roll purred, before realizing what she'd said and clapped her hands over her mouth in embarrassment. *That* had been unexpected.

"Oh, dear," Dr. Light worried. "I was afraid of that. Tango's programming was a little problematic when I was installing the upgrades and it looks like there's some personality leakage. Don't worry, it should go away when you disengage."

"Please tell me you can fix it!" Roll mewled pitifully.

"I'll do my best," her father placated, "but you know Tango's feline personality isn't exactly the most cooperative."

Rock was doing his best not to laugh. He really was. (13)

"That is some seriously buggy code there, man," Hermes observed. Not the Roll girl's problems – those were entirely the mortal programming of her and her cat, and pretty dang funny in his opinion – but that of her father, Dr. Light.

"Tell me about it," Hephaestus groused. Dr. Light wasn't supposed to invent the super adaptors until *after* the world robot tournament, not this far in advance of it. Right now, he should have been in the middle of developing a couple of prototype designs that would eventually produce the super adaptors, not presenting the final products to his children. So he'd examined Dr. Light's code and found a buggy section that refused his attempts to fix it.

"It's bad enough that my three Anchor candidates have Loop memory bugs accessing the failed activation attempt logs," he continued, ignoring Hermes' look of shock, "on top of the near-critical corruption of their branch code, but why does Dr. Light have to be randomly accessing stable timeline memories?"

"Wait," Hermes said, "say that again?"

Hephaestus blinked. "The buggy code is causing him to randomly access stable timeline memories. Right now, he's just getting flashes of knowledge from the baseline, but if it stays like this, he's going to be able to get them from any Loop where he existed."

"That sounds like the Dreaming state affecting several humans the Norns interact with regularly in that service Loop they run," Hermes mused. "Just not nearly as lucid."

"Dreaming state?" Hephaestus asked. "Why have I not heard about this?"

"It's not exactly common," Hermes admitted. "Heck, this is the first time I've heard of it occurring outside the Norns' service Loop. Loopers are Awake, so they automatically retain memories, skills, and powers from any Loop where they were also Awake. Dreamers are a little different. They can't retain skills or powers, but they *can* retain memories from past Loops even though they aren't Awake currently or were in the Loop they're accessing. I haven't heard the state being the result of a bug, but if it is then the bug is about as benign as they get."

"And if it's showing up in someone *now* , then I can probably expect to get even more 'Dreamers' in the future," Hephaestus sighed. "And knowing my luck, they can't all be people I'd want to be accessing Loop memories."

"Dude," Hermes patted the smith on the shoulder, "if this branch was easy to handle, they wouldn't have assigned you to it. That's the price of being as good at this as you are."

Hephaestus ignored the comment. "I swear, it's like Yggdrasil wants Dr. Light to have this code in his matrix."

"Who knows? Maybe it does. Wouldn't be the strangest thing Yggdrasil's ever done." Hermes shrugged. It was true. Hermes couldn't remember who, but some god had once said that operating Yggdrasil was like sitting down to a massive multiplayer social luck-based strategical roleplaying, world-building board game halfway through where the pieces, the dice, and the cards all had their own ideas about how to play and even the *board itself* wanted in on the action. (14)

Blues was racing as fast as he could. Roll had asked him to keep an eye out for a very specific type of energy signature so that he could help with one of the most dangerous enemies since Ra Moon before they got a serious foothold. And he'd still nearly missed it. He'd teleported himself and Beat as close as possible – this individual had put up a field preventing him from getting closer – and began running for his siblings' lives.

Terra of the Stardroids had arrived.

A robot yelp, with accompanying yowl, of pain pierced the air, followed by dual cries.

"RUSH!"

"TANGO!"

Damnit, he needed to move faster. "Beat. Super adaptor."

The jet pack on the super adaptor contributed greatly to his speed, but the sounds of battle in the distance told him he might arrive too late.

"ROCK!"

'Damnit.' he swore to himself. Rock had told him of Roll's potential trauma triggers, and it sounded like a big one might have just gone off. *'Damnitdamnitdamnitdamnitdamnit.'*

He growled as he came within sight of the battle and saw Roll's buster shots splashing off her opponent's personal energy field. When the alien robot grabbed her and pinned her to the ground, he realized the protection didn't entirely extend to physical objects. "Beat. Blade."

The sword formed as he hurtled towards Terra, intent on taking the Stardroid's head off. Unfortunately, Terra seemed to have heard him coming and was even now beginning to turn to meet his charge. He wasn't going to get close enough to deal critical damage before Terra retaliated.

Blues swung anyway, and was rewarded with a cry of pain as Terra fell to the ground clutching his face.

"YOU INSOLENT INFERIOR EARTH ROBOT!" Terra roared, and Blues could see that his cut had carved a long scar on his face and taken out one of the alien robot's eyes. "YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS! MY MASTER WILL OBLITERATE YOU AND EVERYONE WHO DARES TO STAND AGAINST HIS RIGHTFUL CLAIM OF THIS PLANET!"

"Tell him he's free to take a number," Blues retorted. "Now get going before this costs you your *other* eye."

He watched Terra fume in fury, clearly believing that destroying Blues, even if the earth robot had hurt him, would not be difficult. But, in the end, the Stardroid teleported out and left them alone.

"ROCK!" Roll wailed over her fallen brother. "Please be okay, please be okay, pleasebeokay..."

Blues disengaged from Beat and went over to run a field diagnostic on his brother, and sighed in relief at the results.

"He'll be fine," he told Roll. "Repairs shouldn't even be difficult. Just take him to Dr. Light immediately along with Rush and Tango: They look like they didn't take any damage to their IC chips. I'll do everything I can to keep the Stardroids from gaining a foothold."

Roll nodded firmly and teleported herself, her brother, and their support units back to the lab. (15)

"You know, you kind of look like Dr. Wily with a fake beard and cheesy sunglasses," Roll said innocently.

Mr. X, the 'mysterious billionaire philanthropist' sponsoring the World Robot Tournament, sputtered in shock and surprise.

'Totally worth whatever he's going to do in retaliation,' Rock thought to himself as his sister continued to play the 'I'm just an innocent little girl' card. (16)

It was Dr. Wily's seventh invasion and Roll had convinced Rock to let her fight Bass in his super adaptor mode while he went on ahead. Her insistence that Bass was much more amiable when she beat him than when Rock did – something she still didn't quite understand from her solo lives – hadn't gotten her anywhere. Her use of 'paper' in the decision making process had factored in rather better.

Of course, Bass was getting on her absolute last nerve right now, and she was starting to regret the decision.

"Hahahahaha!" he had started laughing at her challenge, which had ironically been what let Rock slip past. "You?! A housekeeping model? Fight *me* ?! With what? A *toaster* ?!"

Roll fumed as Bass howled with laughter in his winged super adaptor form and flexed the claws of her own.

"Or maybe..." Bass's laughter died down and he grinned. "Maybe you find me simply irresistible? Is that it? Did you send dear old Rock on ahead because you wanted some time alone with the most amazing example of male robot in the world?"

Roll twitched.

"That's it, isn't it?" Bass grinned at her expression and flew down until his face was inches from hers.

She hissed at him. Dang it, Tango's personality programming was leaking into hers again...

"Aw, don't be like that," Bass fake-pouted. "Come on. Give me a kiss. You know you want to."

Roll's eyes grew hard, and she slashed at Bass's face with her claws.

"Whoa!" The black robot barely avoided losing an eye, only to get a kick to the stomach before he could take to the air on his wings. He doubled over in reflex, and was promptly at the girl robot's mercy.

She'd punched, kicked, clawed, and blasted him for good measure before leaving his battered form on the ground and going on ahead.

Bass lay there for a long moment before speaking, contemplating the unmatched ferocity that had laid him prone in the first place.

"I think I'm in love..." (17)

Rock had entertained the thought that he wouldn't have to face Bass while he was powered by Evil Energy in this timeline.

No such luck, though his prior knowledge of Bass's reckless fighting style under its influence had made the battle somewhat easier than he recalled.

"Seriously Bass," Rock shook his head. "What were you expecting to accomplish?"

"Heh," Bass chuckled as his body sparked from damage. "Roll looks up to you so much, I thought if I could take you out it would impress her..." (18)

Bass was trying to impress his sister? That was new.

"I probably just saved your life then," Rock folded his arms and gave Bass a flat stare. "If you'd have succeeded, she'd have cut off your head and shoved it into your torso by way of the new anal cavity she'd ripped you."

Bass stared at Rock for a very long moment. "...Yeah, she could, couldn't she?"

Blues was nervous, though few would know it.

He was about to try and face down King, a robot his memories of past lives told him was more than capable of cutting him in half in single combat.

"Please tell me you aren't wussing out," grumbled Bass, his rather interesting partner in this endeavor. Rock had said he was trying to impress Roll for some reason, and Blues had suggested stopping King would go a fair ways towards that.

"Not a chance," Blues retorted, hefting his shield. He'd have to rely on it rather than his buster given King's skill at closing range for melee. "Now follow me." (19)

"Mega Man!" yelled one of the nine figures at the top of the building.

"And Mega Woman!" cackled the lone female next to him.

"Come face your destiny!" the male continued. "Come face your future!"

"Come DIE like the little scrapheaps you are!" the crazed female jumped in front of her partner, cutting him off.

"Who are these bozos?" Bass asked the Light siblings.

"The green one is Quint," Rock explained, "A future-tech clone of me."

"Sounds like a tool," Bass huffed.

"The girl is Waltz," Roll shuddered.

"A murderously crazy future-tech version of Roll," Rock finished for her and watched Bass suppress a shudder himself.

"The seven others..." Roll began. "No idea, but they look like robot masters."

In reality, she and her brother knew full well who those seven were. The Dimensions; Dangan Man, Konro Man, Aircon Man, Komuso Man, the twin Clock Men, and Compass Man; robot masters recruited from the future by Quint and Waltz since Rock and Roll had defeated them and then brought back to the present. But Bass would never believe how they knew that.

"These guys are the Dimensions!" Waltz screeched. "And they're gonna help us scatter your pretty little circuits all over the c–urk!"

Waltz looked down in incomprehension at the energy blade sticking out the front of her torso.

"No more distractions," Quint's voice emerged from behind her with all the warmth of the antarctic. With a quick jerk of his buster arm, with which he'd produced the energy blade, he cut Waltz's torso vertically, the blade exiting the top of her head and destroying her IC chip.

Then he took his boot and pushed her lifeless body off the roof of the building.

Down, down, down the body of Waltz tumbled as the two youngest children of Dr. Light and the son of Dr. Wily watched in shock, until it shattered on the unforgiving street.

"Dude," Bass exhaled. (20)

Roll had forgotten how ***not fun*** Roboenza was. It had been a long time since she'd had it. She honestly wished it could have been a lot longer.

It was kind of hard to go out and make sure her brother was safe when she felt like coughing up a processor.

Or whatever the robot equivalent of a lung was.

Ugh, she felt terrible. (21)

"Hephaestus," Hermes said from where he was examining some data, "I've been going over this Anchor configuration of yours and I can't quite figure it out. Obviously you have three individuals you're trying to Anchor through, but this isn't a standard three-Anchor configuration. If I didn't know better, I'd say you took a two-Anchor configuration and slapped it over the commonly used one-Anchor configuration, but even then it doesn't look right."

"That's pretty much what I did," Hephaestus admitted. "Rock is the main Anchor holding up his Loop, while I set Roll and Blues to an experimental 'provisional Anchor' state to shore up both the Loop and hold Rock steady while the Anchoring process finalizes. The 'provisional Anchor' code allows for a one-time adjustment up to full Anchor, should such a thing be needed, or down to normal looper which I've set to occur automatically if the attempt succeeds without issue."

Hermes personally thought that was brilliant, but it seemed there was more to it.

"There's a possibility that it can even survive the removal of one individual in the configuration by adjusting the remaining two into a standard two-Anchor configuration before the Loop collapses."

"That sounds a little problematic," Hermes observed. "What are the odds that could even work?"

"2%" Hephaestus sighed, "but it gave me an extra 1% for the overall success of the Loop activating."

"Here's hoping we don't need to find out. Anyway, it's about time for the intersection of both Loops," Hermes stretched. The god of travel turned to where the two nymphs he'd brought were watching from an observation terminal. "And speaking of chances, how's the overall success chance holding up, ladies?"

"Holding steady at 90% Dr. Hermes," one of them saluted in a bout of sillyness while the other giggled.

'Wait,' Hermes thought to himself. That didn't sound right. He typed a few lines on his remote terminal and brought up the data.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 90%

NO CHANGE SINCE BEGINNING OF ATTEMPT INITIATION.

"Hephaestus..." Hermes began. "I know your assigned branch isn't exactly normal due to all the data corruption, but shouldn't these odds have changed by now? I mean, it took seven tries to get a variant scenario up that would let Sonic's branch stabilize and start looping, and the numbers were all over the place. They'd go down when his problems didn't get resolved properly or increased beyond expectations and go up when he solved them. So why has this scenario been holding steady at 90%?"

Hephaestus sighed. "Probably because the problem area Yggdrasil predicted hasn't happened yet."

Hermes blinked in shock. Hasn't happened yet? "I watched your Anchors nearly *die* before the Loop was stabilized, and that's not a *problem area?!* "

"Yggdrasil doesn't seem to think so," Hephaestus returned.

"Whoa," breathed one of the valkyries, Hermes couldn't tell which at the moment, "it just dropped a whole 10% after a reality warping event."

"Then it's started," Hephaestus intoned as he focused on his terminal and the data being displayed. "We're now in the problem zone everyone. Look sharp." (22)

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1) Waking Up is hard to do. :P

2) 'Well intentioned' terrorists vs religious cult fanatics. Smart money's on 'everyone loses'.

3) Blues has issues.

4) Hephaestus keeps getting all the toughest jobs that no one else wants, don't ya know.

5) Close Call #1.

6) Not all activation attempts are equal. Some can stabilize even if the anchor candidate dies before the full Loop runs. The Megaverse isn't that lucky.

7) Free Will really is kind of scary if you think about it.

8) The Mega baseline is still a bit fuzzy in many places.

9) The Mega Men shooting dangerous opponents in the face is going to become a *thing* , isn't it?

10) Hephaestus does not like his wife anymore. Given that she's the Eiken admin (Aphrodite's allergic to actual work), neither does most of the multiverse.

11) Because having mind-controlled loopers time travel in order to try and kill their past selves causes *problems* . Pre-Loop, Yggdrasil could handle this kind of thing, no sweat. Now… not so much.

12) Tell me, does the mental image of Super Adaptor Proto Man with an arm-sword look as awesome as I think it does?

13) Catgirl Roll. Yeah, I couldn't help myself.

14) And the rules change whenever no one's looking.

15) Close Call #2.

16) They're not even online yet and they're already using Loop memories to troll their villainous adversaries. *sniff* I'm so proud!

17) A little something inspired by the Battle and Chase Manga. There, Roll had a crush on Bass, and he only went along with it to troll Rock. Clearly (as in, personal headcanon) this was because Bass is interested in girls who can beat the crap out of him and that version Roll wasn't battle capable.

18) Bass... *shakes head* Stop taking your romance cues from thought processes worthy of daytime soap operas.

19) I have a feeling that this *still* ended up being Close Call #3.

20) I'm with Bass on this one.

21) Roboenza: The disease where some would think being driven crazy is the *preferable* option.

22) *Worlds Collide* in 3...2...

Loop 1 Part 2: Worlds Collide Again

Mega Loop 1.0 part 2: Worlds Collide... Again (0)

Rock blinked as he felt... *something* wash over him. He could have sworn it felt familiar, but even the original lifetime hadn't...

Wait...

There was a blank section of his original memories that seemed to be spontaneously restoring itself. Slowly, but enough that he was sure something like what he'd just felt had happened in his original life.

He shook himself out of his thoughts and decided to go about his business. It looked like they'd come together in time.

"Hey Dr. Light," he greeted his father cheerfully as he carried a few tools into the lab, "how's Bond Man coming along?"

"Quite well actually," Dr. Light replied, looking a bit distracted as he did on occasion. "In fact, he's almost ready. I just need to finish programming his IC chip."

"I'm eager to see what he's li–"

"Hey, Rock!" Roll called from the other room. "Blues is on the line!"

"Sorry dad," Rock apologized. He and Roll had become closer to Blues over the years, but the eldest sibling still refused to speak with their father more than absolutely necessary.

"It's fine," Dr. Light smiled melancholily. "Go."

Rock joined his sister by the vidphone to talk to their brother. As tended to be the case, it wasn't a social call, and Blues got right to

the point.

"Do either of you have a blank spot in your original memories that suddenly seems to be restoring itself?"

"Yeah," both Rock and Roll replied in unison.

"Me too," Blues intoned. "Be on your guard. If this is happening now, it means something's u–"

Blues was cut off by a scream in the background of his end of the call, followed by the sound of sirens.

"Gotta go," Blues rushed. "Looks like whatever it is isn't wasting any time."

And with that the call was cut off.

"Is our brother *ever* going to ask for help with anything?" Roll huffed.

"It doesn't seem likely," Rock postulated sadly. "Let's suit up and go help anyway." (1)

Sonic had known this was coming. He and his friends (and often-not-so-friendly-rivals) had prepared for it their whole Loop after that Hermes guy had asked if they were willing to help some newbies get online despite the possibility of severe risks. On the upside, they'd apparently finally be able to have baseline Loops instead of variants.

Sonic had long suspected that the Loops he was stuck in had never quite matched whatever his baseline was, but it was news to the rest of them.

But back to the topic at hand. Apparently at least one whole Loop, and all native loopers, had already pretty much been erased from existence trying to get these guys they were being asked to help up and running. But not only was he not the kind of hedgehog to leave

people in need of help hanging, it sounded like one heck of an adventure.

And the rest of his fellow loopers, including the newest additions brought on by the Crash, apparently felt the same way in at least one of those two respects. Hermes had even promised to pull some strings so everyone would be Awake for this. Supposedly this Loop needed every bit of help it could get. It sounded easy. Just make sure that all of them got through their first Loop alive and intact, and they'd stabilize and be just like everyone else in the Loops.

But it looked like they'd still been blindsided by Eggman and... whoever he'd partnered up with – man, having to piece together his baseline memories after not having access to them for who-knew-how-many Loops was *hard* – shortly after the latest genesis wave. As a result, many of his friends and allies, most of whom were experienced loopers, had vanished without a trace.

It was going to be damn hard to protect the new guys when they couldn't even seem to protect themselves.

He was currently trying to talk the Chaotix; Vector, Espio, Charmy, Mighty, and Ray; into helping look for everyone, but Vector seemed hung up on the issue of payment. It was beginning to look like Sonic might actually have to fork over some serious Loop bling this time.

"Guys, please!" he pleaded. "I really think Eggman's up to something serious. These are experienced loopers vanishing and we still gotta think of the new guys we're supposed to help soon!"

"Hey, we agreed to this thing Hermes asked like everyone else," Vector reclined in his chair casually. "We'll be happy to help. Just as soon as you pay us for the last dozen or so jobs we've done for you over the course of the Loops." (2)

"This is weird," Hermes said. "The Zone search engine I made for Sonic's Loop so I could keep track of where the heck they went at

times can't find where the doctors are right now. Those Zones of theirs have an annoying tendency to manifest just outside the branch and I needed a way to find them if they went in one while I wasn't watching. The Sonic Loop's Zone code is pretty unmistakable and the program *should* have located the doctors by now."

"That *is* weird," Hephaestus admitted. "Try hitching a tracer program on your boy Sonic and we'll see where it leads when they go after their foes."

"Yeah," Hermes agreed. "I tend to use the search engine because it's less resource intensive, but we need to be able to watch them." (3)

"Hey, you remember the last time we did this? Good. The doctors are watching us, so let's give them a good show until we're off their grid."

Rock recalled the hastily whispered words of his current 'adversary' Sonic and did exactly that. He fought as as much like his slowly restoring memories indicated until they could believably reconcile and force the 'roboticized master' watching them to intervene.

He and Roll had joined Blues at the bank robbery, only to find that the number of roboticized masters committing it was double what they remembered it should be, and half of them looked completely unfamiliar. Roll had managed to capture one, a yellow and white robot with a squirrel design that used an energy membrane between its limbs to fly, but the rest had escaped. Rock had gone after them, taking the hit from the blue blur that he could tell was mechanical this time around, and just barely making it through the portal before it closed. Blues had the data readings, Roll had a prisoner, and he knew his dad would be able to get him back.

He'd had a meeting with an old friend to make. (4)

Sonic had come in like last time, same entrance and same lines even, but he'd whispered the message and Rock had played along. Of course, Sonic didn't do things exactly the same way, and so Rock had to improvise. It was... surprisingly fun sparring like this with an opponent not trying to kill him.

They'd gone back over, and Rock had decided to do things a little differently himself by only calling for Rush and Eddie (Sonic had managed once again to disarm his buster). The fight had continued, both he and Sonic throwing their lines out like they were in a play, until they felt they'd delayed enough.

"That gem your buddies stole from the bank isn't yours! Just return it and I'll call off the chase!" Rock called out loud and clear.

"I didn't steal anything!" Sonic retorted with equal volume. " *You're* the one who kidnapped *my* friends!"

"I didn't kidnap anyone!" Rock yelled, counting down in his head. *'3...2...1...'*

Right on cue, the watching roboticized master, Tails Man, descended and engaged them. Not even pausing to examine the situation, Rock and Sonic rescued the civilians caught in the crossfire before engaging the enemy themselves. A quick use of a charged shot to stun and Sonic's spin dash to destabilize the roboticization matrix, and it was time for Rock to copy the weapon data and finish the process.

In a flash of light, Sonic's friend Tails was standing in the place of the roboticized master, looking disoriented.

"That still feels weird," Tails observed groggily.

A quick reunion, a scan of the area to make sure that no other potential spies of the doctors were watching, and they began to discuss business.

"So," Rock began, "You all are repeating your lives over as well?"

"Looping," Sonic replied. "That's what it's called. We've been at it for a while actually. I'll give you the full speech once we get back to your place."

As Rock digested the term 'looping', Tails suddenly spoke up. "Hey, isn't there an attack on your home right about now?"

"Probably," Rock allowed. "But that's why Roll agreed to wait there and surprise whoever the doctors sent for dad."

"Roll..." Sonic pondered. "That's your sister, right? The housekeeping model?"

"I don't think a housekeeping model's gonna slow down either of our doctors much," Tails agreed.

Rock smirked. "Ah, but Roll's changed. She's just as good as I am now. Even a bit better in some ways."

Roll had indeed agreed to stay behind and defend the lab. But even so, she was still surprised when Bass came to attack instead of one of Wily's other robots. His partner had pinned Blues down and grabbed Dr. Light while she engaged Bass.

"Bass!" she pleaded as she brandished her buster at him. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because my father said so," Bass sneered at her. He didn't seem to recognize her as an ally. Wily had overwritten the mind of his own son to make him attack the lab.

Out of the corner of her eye, Roll saw Blues hit with a lucky shot and fall to the floor. She needed to do something.

"Then I'll have to stop-uff!" Roll was cut off by a kick to the gut. She fell to the floor realizing she'd forgotten how competent Bass could be when he wasn't being distracted or arrogant. She groped around with her non-buster hand for something to use, and grabbed the first thing she came across. She shot with her buster and threw the item she'd grabbed, hoping to send him off balance.

Bass sidestepped the shot, but was blindsided by the toaster she threw at him. He shook his head partly to clear it and partly at the absurdity–

You?! A housekeeping model? Fight me?! With what? A toaster?!

–and managed to catch the reinforced weapon-grade broom she'd swung at his face. He caught her follow-up kick as well and then kicked her hard in the gut while she was off balance.

"Sorry doll," he sneered, "but that was your free shot and you only get one."

The girl robot glared at him with a ferocity he'd never seen before–

–but he just grinned cheekily and followed his partner back through the warp ring with their captive, leaving her behind in a damaged lab and the realization that she hadn't been able to protect her family again.

Fighting back tears, she activated her comm. "Rock... I... I'm sorry. I tried, but... But they still took dad..." (5)

Auto had been told to contact Dr. Cossack and Dr. Lalinde and tell them what happened to the lab. Considering what everyone was being told, it was probably best he wasn't there. As for the rest of them? Sonic and his friend had requested that they gather in the main lab for an important talk. And what a talk it was.

"So, we're stuck in a repeating period of time called the Loops?" Blues stared at the hedgehog known as Sonic as he went over some form of holographic powerpoint that he'd pulled out of thin air. "Run by some divine supercomputer named Yggdrasil administrated by gods straight out of ancient mythology?" (6)

Over to the side, the fox known as Tails worked on his sister's Mega Buster, modifying it to use something he called the 'Spin Dash Blast' which would be able to restore the roboticized masters to their biological state. Once Sonic was done explaining, Roll was going to use it on Ray Man, the roboticized master they'd caught.

"Yep," Sonic nodded. This was actually kind of thrilling for him. He doubted anyone in the Loops had given the 'Welcome to the Multiverse' speech to someone whose Loop hadn't even finished going live yet. "And you're not the only ones. There's all sorts of different Loops out there, each one with its own Anchor. Most of them have just one, though some Loops are divided up into sections called Linked Loops where each section has its own Anchor. You guys are the first I've come across that have more than one Anchor in a single section though."

"Finished!" Tails called out as he closed up Roll's buster. "Your turn," he said to Rock.

Rock obediently held up his own Mega Buster for the two-tailed fox to work on and Sonic continued his speech.

"Anyway, every so often you can end up in what's known as a fused Loop where you either get visitors from another Loop, you visit their Loop, or you end up in some Loop mish-mashed with stuff from both of your home universes or more. But that's not what's happening here. We're on what's known as a Tandem Run."

"Tandem Run?" Rock inquired.

"It's something that Linked Loops generally do by default since actions in certain sections are supposed to affect events in the

others. But it can be done with otherwise unrelated Loops that cross each other in the baseline, like ours do. Our sysadmin, Hermes, told us that we've been stuck in variant Loops, that's when your home Loop differs from your baseline before you even do anything to change events, because our baseline can't load properly unless all the other Loops it crosses are looping or independently stable. Even if the specific baseline Loop iteration doesn't intersect with yours, you still need to be up and running for it to load right."

"And you're done," Tails told Rock as he closed up his buster and began to move towards Blues. "Your turn!"

"I really don't like anyone messing with my systems," he told the fox bluntly. "Sorry."

"And none of these 'gods' know when this will be fixed?" Roll asked.

"Hermes told me they stopped giving repair estimates a while back," Sonic admitted. "And we can't really do anything about it unless we ascend to their level, which would basically break our Loop and destroy our home universe and everyone in it. All we can do is keep going and try to stay as sane as possible and hope we don't run into anything like what caused the Crash."

"That..." Blues start–

Reality didn't like what was happening.

–ed. "That had something to do with us, didn't it?"

"Er..." Sonic looked nervous. "Yeah, kinda. Recently something destroyed an Anchor on the metaphysical level and made his Loop collapse so hard that Yggdrasil forced a system-wide reset. Set every looper to Awake to shore up the Loops and shook a few new ones out, or whatever Hermes called it, in a bunch of places. Apparently even the memories of this place are gone. Hermes said that the Anchor that was destroyed was sent to a fused Loop with you guys to get your universe patched up enough to start looping."

"The person-shaped hole in our memories..." Rock and Roll said in stereo.

"Whoa," Tails' eyebrows shot up. "You... remember the previous attempts to get your universe looping? That... I really don't think that's a good sign."

"Which might explain why they have to use three of us as 'Anchors' instead of one," Blues observed.

"Anyway," Sonic continued. "There was apparently some reality virus or something that tore apart the Anchor, only for Yggdrasil to tear the virus apart as well. So your admin asked ours to see if we'd be willing to take a risk and help get you all looping, and we all figured why not? I mean, from here we just need to save my friends, your dad, and the day, preferably in that order. I remember some of how good you guys are, so we should be done in no time."

"It won't be that easy," Blues deadpanned.

"Sheesh," Sonic groused to Rock. "Your brother always like this?"

"Yes," both Rock and Roll replied.

"Anyway," Tails observed, "we should get Ray back to normal and start getting the portal up."

"Right," Roll nodded and went to retrieve the roboticized master in question. When she returned, she put Ray Man down in the middle of the room and began charging her buster before firing.

A flash of light came from the form and when it subsided, a disoriented anthropomorphic squirrel was sitting next to a glowing yellow orb. Roll picked up the orb and immediately absorbed it, her armor changing from yellow and cream to yellow and white as she did.

"Ray Glide?" Roll said to herself and extended her arms, an energy membrane flaring to life between the arm and leg on each side. "Huh. The energy membrane allows for gliding and limited flight. Some sort of personal gravity manipulation as well to artificially reduce mass. Not bad."

"Ugh, where am I?" the squirrel asked.

"Hey Ray!" Sonic greeted. "You're over at Rock's place right now. Apparently our doc and his managed to snag you along with the others and roboticized you to fight for them."

"Rock?" Ray's brow furrowed in confusion. "Oh, right, that guy whose universe we agreed to help. Sorry, I'm still a bit out of it."

"No problemo," Sonic grinned. "Guys? This is Ray the Flying Squirrel. He's one of my oldest buds in our baseline and a member of a team called the Chaotix. He's a newbie looper like yourselves since he was 'shaken loose' as a result of the Crash, but he's still 100% awesome." (7)

"I'm really not all that great," Ray rubbed his head, embarrassed.

"The guy also has a tendency to sell himself short," Sonic grinned and gave Ray a playful noogie. "Keeps trying to compare himself to me when there really is no comparison."

"Uh, huh," Rock folded his arms. Sonic's personality was coming back to him now. Jerk, brash, overconfident, more than a little reckless, and a heart of gold beneath it all.

"Anyway," Roll cut in while Tails worked on the portal in the background. "We should try and leave someone here at the lab. Rush, Tango, and Beat are coming obviously, but Auto and Eddie just aren't enough protection if Dr. Wily and your Dr. Eggman send anyone back."

"So leave it to us," a female voice interrupted.

The room turned to see Dr. Noel Lalinde in the doorway, flanked by her robotic daughter.

"Tempo!" Roll cheered and rushed to embrace her friend. "How've you been?"

"I have been well," Tempo smiled. "Auto contacted us and we teleported right over. Mother and I will be honored to guard the lab for you while you rescue your father."

"Wow," Sonic whistled. "She certainly ages better than your dad."

"Thank you," Dr. Lalinde smiled.

Rock chuckled. "Sonic, meet Dr. Noel Lalinde and her daughter Tempo, aka Quake Woman. Dr. Lalinde, Tempo, this is Sonic and his friends Ray and Tails, the latter of which is working on getting us to where dad is."

"Got it!" Tails cheered as a ring-shaped portal opened up near the wall. "It was a little harder than I expected. The readings were a bit like the Special Zone, but also kinda... off."

"Who cares!" Sonic slapped his friend on the back. "We got us a day to go save, right everyone?"

Rock, Roll, Blues, and Ray all nodded firmly and stepped towards the portal.

"Be careful you all," Dr. Lalinde told them.

"Don't worry," Rock assured her as he stepped through the ring.

"We'll bring everyone back safe and sound," Roll finished as she followed her brother.

"Okay," Hermes concentrated on his terminal. "Trace is good and we have... whoa."

"What in the...?" Hephaestus stared at the screen.

"That... that sort of looks like Zone code," Hermes began nervously, "but it looks like it's merged with..."

"I... I think it *is* ," Hephaestus was pale. *'No. Not that.* ***Anything*** *but that... Not when the Loop is so close to stabilizing...'*

The group emerged from the portal and all stared. To Rock and Blues, it looked somewhat like what their slowly restoring memories told them it should. Wildly divergent landscapes with no transition areas between them and bizarre geography that defied common sense, good taste, and several laws of physics.

But if anything it was even more bizarre than their memories depicted.

Sonic and Tails on the other hand were staring at the ground while Ray and Roll were staring at the landscape in horrified fascination. The checkered ground was different than what they were expecting. The dark brown squares were so dark as to be nearly black, and the lighter ones were so light as to be almost white. But what really got their attention was a gem embedded in the ground close by.

"Sonic," Tails looked shocked. "Is that?"

Sonic bent down to examine the gem. "Not quite, but close enough to mean trouble."

"What is it?" Blues asked.

"Grist," Sonic said gravely. "Looks like one of *those* things merged with one of our Zones and the not-so-good doctors lucked right into it." (8)

ANALYSIS OF POCKET DIMENSION COMPOSITE CODE COMPLETE.

'SPECIAL ZONE' CONFIGURATION NATIVE TO BRANCH DESIGNATE 'SONIC': 50%

SKAIA PROTOCOL: 50%

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 70%

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0) A fair amount of dialogue in the Worlds Collide chapters of Loop 1.0, this and later ones, was lifted straight from the comics. Such dialogue is not my original work, and should not be taken that way. It was, however, necessary for certain scenes that were relevant to the progression of Loop 1.0 and had little or no reason why they would be different.

1) Obviously working through Blues's issues is going to take more than one lifetime.

2) I don't think the reality of how serious this is has quite hit Vector yet. Then again, Sonic should really settle his accounts more expeditiously.

3) Hmm... Does Yggdrasil have a Lost and Found they could check?

4) Ah, the old friends you didn't remember before meeting them again...

5) So... Bass went from crushing on Roll to wanting to crush Roll. I smell foul play. Or train tracks.

6) Earliest 'Welcome to the Multiverse' talk ever. As if anyone needed more proof the Megaverse is messed up.

7) Introducing Ray the Flying Squirrel, the first of several never-before-seen Sonicverse loopers (as well as several new roboticized

masters). Ray had a single playable appearance in the arcade game *SegaSonic the Hedgehog* where he was teamed with Sonic himself and Mighty the Armadillo. His ability to glide/fly, as well as his characterization, is from the Archie Comics adaptation.

8) Oh, this can't *possibly* be good...

Loop 1 Part 3: Roboticized Masters

Mega Loop 1.0 part 3: Robots, Doctors, and Skaia. Oh My.

Bass glared at the two robots in front of him.

Dr. Wily's Copy Robots stared blankly back.

Bass had never liked these two, but his dad liked to have them around in case he needed to impersonate his mortal enemies Mega Man or Mega Woman. A tool-using model and a housekeeping model retrofitted for combat that Bass, who was designed solely for combat, had faced multiple times. His memories told him that he hated them both and desired nothing more than to finally prove himself superior. The strongest robot in the world. And Dr. Wily's one true son.

So why was there this niggling doubt in the back of his head? (1)

He shook his head free of such weakness and ignored the one that looked like Mega Man – Rock some part of his neural net reminded him – and looked over the one who shared Mega Woman's – Roll's – appearance. The red eyes stared back emotionlessly and were the only things aside from the acid green scarf that differentiated her from the daughter of his father's eternal rival.

There was one more difference, Bass was realizing. The female Copy Robot didn't have Roll's inn–

I think...

–er fire.

"Dr. Wily wants you two to intercept and delay your counterparts and their allies while he and Dr. Eggman finish their joint project. Take the Genesis Unit with you. Do not fail."

The two Copy Robots grinned evilly as they processed their orders. "Yes, sir."

Hephaestus's valkyrie probation officers had seen the emergency for what it was and told him he could do what he needed to to keep the branch from collapsing. Apparently he was allowed some leeway in his probation when the situation was urgent. He hadn't questioned it. He'd just said thanks and gotten to work.

The Skaia Protocol was one of those things that was... complicated. It was effectively the mortal manifestation of a universe generation program in Yggdrasil's system. An important part of the subroutines that permitted Yggdrasil to 'grow', and thus it couldn't simply be taken offline or set to Read-Only. It had to run.

Unfortunately, the fact that mortals could access and use it to make their own universes was a problem. The Homestuck place was the looping area of the branch where the Skaia Protocol was housed, and significant effort had been put in to making it an independently stable universe in no need of an Anchor, which had then been quarantined from the possibility of fused Loops.

But the Skaia Protocol itself was... less easily contained. Instances of it 'drifted' around Yggdrasil's system where they could fuse with who-knew-what and/or Anchors could encounter them. And if those instances created universes that were not properly quarantined, then those universes could then generate additional instances of the protocol.

Any time an Anchor looped into an instance of the protocol, it was immediately flagged by the system. A quarantine team was then sent to debrief the Anchor, and any other looper involved, at the beginning of their next Loop and confiscate anything... problematic.

The Skaia Protocol and items from it... rarely reacted well to established universal code. Using them in an established universe

could potentially do far more damage than simply causing a Loop iteration to fail.

The Grist that could be harvested from the monsters that tended to inhabit instances of the Skaia Protocol were, in a way, bits of Yggdrasil code manifested in a form mortals could understand. If you knew what you were doing, you could use Grist to make anything you could imagine. If you didn't know what you were doing, you could cause the reality around you to crash.

And two mortals who liked to frequently straddle the line between knowing and not knowing what they were doing had chanced upon an instance of this protocol. An instance that had somehow become enmeshed with a type of pocket universe known as a Special Zone where the laws of space and time could be freely bent any which way the mortal master of the Zone chose. And they had given themselves plenty of time to learn just what they could do with all this.

Hephaestus would have dearly loved to shut the thing down and toss everyone back to their home Loops, consequences be damned, but Yggdrasil seemed to be of the mind that the leeway on his probation didn't extend that far.

ACCESS DENIED.

NO SIGNIFICANT CHANGES CAN BE MADE TO BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' WITHOUT AUDIT AND APPROVAL OF YGGDRASIL OVERSIGHT COUNCIL.

CONTACT RELEVANT OVERSEER TO ARRANGE AN AUDIT.

'Relevant Overseer' meant his father. Zeus.

Damnit. (2)

"Dr. Eggman's your father?!" Rock stared at the two-tailed fox in confusion.

"Sort of," Tails replied. "He's not in most variants or the baseline, but since Hermes couldn't use our baseline to start our Loop, he apparently ran several different variants until one worked which was then used in place of our baseline as our most common Loop. And in that one, I'm a genetic experiment by Dr. Ivo Robotnik, Eggman's original name, which makes him my father the same way Dr. Light is yours."

"I can understand that," Rock nodded.

"He's actually not that bad a guy there," Tails explained. "Sure he's still a 'villain', but that's the result of a type of mental condition called Science Related Memetic Disorder, or SRMD for short. 'Eggman' was the personality he took on when he suffered an attack and even that part of him subconsciously *wanted* to be stopped every time. Even at his worst he'd be considered a villainy hobbyist compared to the current version. I was kind of looking forward to him joining us in the Loops, but I guess I know why he won't be if this version is his baseline. Still, I can hope, right?" (3)

"Right," Rock agreed firmly, sympathetic to the fox's plight. He could only imagine if the man he'd always known as his father turned out to be just a small part of some–

Rock's musings were cut short as Rush tackled him out of the way of a buster shot. Looking up, he saw the Genesis Unit; Buster Rod G, Hyper Storm H, and Mega Water S; along with both of the Copy Robots.

"Tango!" Copy Roll admonished the feline who'd rescued his sister from being shot like Rush had rescued him. "Bad kitty! No treats!"

Dr. Wily was trying to ignore his growing headache now that the last Chaos Emerald had been secured. He and his new partner had

gotten together with a brilliantly ambitious plan to use this one-of-a-kind pocket zone to make themselves into the absolute omnipotent rulers of their respective universes. With this place serving as a convenient spot to meet each other over tea between forcing their local populaces to recognize their greatness.

But he kept getting the damnedest headaches. He'd have taken something for them, but they came with ideas. Flashes of memory, or perhaps precognition? They'd led him to talking Ivo into making double their original number of roboticized masters, and they'd convinced him to bring forth even more robot masters for his army.

Now they were telling him that Ivo could become a threat. But... Ivo was the friend he'd always wanted. One who could not only match his brilliance like Thomas, but still respected Wily's as well. Sure, it descended into rivalry at times, but that was to be expected of capable geniuses like them.

"Fine!" he declared. "Whoever's nemeses manage to survive the longest can claim their world is superior!"

"It's a bet!" Ivo declared as he enthusiastically shook on it.

Could Ivo really betray him? Hmm... better put some contingencies in place.

BEEP "Hi, you've reached the personal line of Zeus, Lord of the Olympians and God of Storms First Class. Remember to vote Zeus in any and all upcoming elections! Zeus: The god who has only the best in mind. I'm sorry I can't come to the line right now, but I'm either attending to important business or entertaining a guest. Please leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible." *BEEP*

"YOU LAZY WOMANIZING POLITICIAN!" Hermes screamed into the phone. It was not the first message he'd left. "STOP BEDDING WHOEVER YOU MANAGED TO CON THIS TIME AND DEAL WITH

SOME ACTUAL DAMN BUSINESS FOR ONCE! IF YOU DON'T RUSH THAT AUDIT THROUGH IMMEDIATELY I'LL MAKE CERTAIN THAT YOUR WIFE KNOWS *EXACTLY* WHO AND WHAT YOU DID IN HER OFFICE RECENTLY!"

Hephaestus was meanwhile examining Dr. Wily's code. He'd sworn he'd seen a virus in it a few times, but the dang thing vanished whenever he took a closer look. But it was a different piece of code he was looking at right now, and not one that boded well for this branch or the activation attempt.

Dr. Albert W. Wily had the same 'Dreaming Bug' in his code that Dr. Light had. (4)

Sonic was handling Buster Rod G without a problem, Tails was having only minor issues with Hyper Storm H, Blues was in a defensive stalemate with Mega Water S, Rock was in an evenly matched aerial duel atop Rush with the male Copy Robot on an Item-2 jet, which left Roll and Ray to handle the female Copy Robot.

And she'd gotten a lucky shot on Tango.

"Don't hurt my cat!" Roll yelled as she fired on her double, only to have each shot intercepted.

"Aw, poor Roll!" Copy Roll grinned as she dodged a tentative strike from Ray and hopped aboard her own Item-2 jet to gain the aerial advantage. "Can't fly. Can't keep up. Should have just stayed in the kitchen!" (5)

"I-I'll show you!" Ray stuttered as he flew up and got in Copy Roll's face.

"Get off me you stupid rodent!" Copy Roll screeched as she swatted the young squirrel-person off of her.

But that moment of distraction was all Roll needed to activate her Ray Glide weapon and fly up herself using a jump and her own artificially decreased mass. And unlike using the Item-2 jet, she didn't need to worry about keeping her footing.

Roll crashed into her double and tackled her off the Item-2 jet, sending both into a fall. Roll positioned herself in such a way that she landed on top and drove her copy's body into the hard ground.

Off to the side, she saw Rock take out his double with the Tail Wind. Sonic and Tails had already defeated their adversaries, and Blues, upon seeing the rest finished, let out a sharp whistle and let Beat take out Mega Water S from behind. Tango came to join her, not particularly any worse for wear.

"Well," Sonic grinned, "that was fun! Wonder what the docs'll throw at us next."

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 60%

The group had walked through a number of areas, braving hazards native to both worlds. They also occasionally had to deal with robotic versions of things Sonic informed them were called 'Underlings'. He didn't seem all that thrilled about their current robotic nature either.

Eventually, they had located a series of springs that allowed them to rapidly climb to higher ground, where they saw the imposing form of the Wily Egg in the distance. And behind it in the sky on either side was a golden sun and purple moon made into the likenesses of Eggman and Wily respectively.

"Yep," Sonic deadpanned. "Same old doctors. Subtle as a meteor impact."

"Elec Man prefers the term 'blown transformer'," Roll chimed in.

"Eh," Sonic shrugged. "Po-tay-to, po-tah-to."

"Hold on everyone," Blues cautioned. "The sun and moon don't look right."

"I-I don't think those f-faces would look right on anything," Ray offered.

"Not that," Blues cut him off, concentrating. "Rock, Roll, take a look at those with your Sit-Rep scanners."

His siblings nodded and in a moment, both sported shaded visors like their brother. (6)

"Wait, you guys have cool shades too?" Sonic blinked. "Then why is your brother the only one who uses them?"

"Because I'm the military model of the family," Blues intoned. "The shades contain a comprehensive Sit-Rep system I like to have available at all times."

"And he likes wearing shades," Rock smirked.

"I look good in shades," Blues shot back as his siblings turned to gaze upon the deformed sun and moon.

"Are those..." Roll gasped.

"...cities?" Rock finished.

"As far as I can tell," Blues allowed. "Heavily damaged, but the glow from both hides it. The doctors must have destroyed them before remodeling their appearances."

Tails drew in a sharp breath. "Prospit and Derse... The doctors... took them *both* out? At once?" (7)

"Y-you've heard of them?" Ray inquired nervously.

Tails nodded absently. "Prospit is the guardian of Skaia and protects it from Derse, but is forever doomed to fail. They both are supposed to have armies. Fleets."

"Like the one Eggman keeps building over and over even when he's *not* a completely evil douche?" Sonic reminded the fox.

"And Wily's made at least one space station with weapons that could easily demolish either of those places directly," Rock nodded.

"What's going on here?" Tails wondered. "This is clearly some version of the Skaia Protocol, but everything is different from how it's supposed to run! And on top of that, we haven't run into any of our friends yet!"

"Awwwww," the unmistakable condescending voice of Dr. Eggman pierced the tableau, "does wittle Tails miss his wittle friends?"

The group of robots and mobians turned to meet the speaker. There in the sky, riding in their personal trademarked flying machines were Drs. Eggman and Wily. Along with no less than sixteen roboticized masters. Made from the friends and allies of Sonic, Tails, and Ray.

The Light siblings got pings from the robots' transponders, revealing their identities.

Knuckles Man

Rose Woman

Shadow Man

Silver Man

Blaze Woman

Charmy Man

Espio Man

Vector Man

Marine Woman

Cream Woman

Mighty Man

Shade Woman

Acorn Woman

Boomer Man

Cool Man

Bunny Woman

"Let's turn that frown upside down, whaddaya say?"

"Screw it," Hermes suddenly said, stopping the frustrated pacing he was doing in the office. Zeus had finally picked up, and hadn't exactly been enthusiastic about pushing through an audit allowing necessary changes to the universe his son was administrating. He'd still agreed, but it was clear he did so under protest and threat of irate wife.

"What?" Hephaestus looked puzzled.

"So we're cut off from the higher adjustments we're normally allowed to make," Hermes stated. "So Zeus is being himself as usual. So what? What can we still do?"

Hephaestus sighed. "Analyze data. Send subconscious nudges to the inhabitants that they could very well ignore. Standard temporal flow adjustments normally used for coding moment-to-moment. Maybe a minor intervention or two. Why?"

Hermes slid purposefully into his seat by his remote terminal. "Because I'm Hermes the trickster. And you're Hephaestus, the most successful survivor of creation's crap the Olympians have ever produced regardless of how unintentional. We've worked with worse."

Hephaestus blinked, and his face hardened with purpose equal to his fellow's as he turned to his own terminal.

"Indeed we have."

Dr. Albert W. Wily had been enjoying the ensuing melee between his and Ivo's ingenious joint creations and their eternal foes. One half, the half his mysterious ideas suggested would have been all they'd made by this point, had gone after Sonic, Mega Man, Proto Man, Rush, and Beat. The other half had gone after Mega Woman, Tails, Tango, and that skittish squirrel Ray.

Of course, then Proto Man had to spoil everything by fleeing the battle to go on ahead and rescue Thomas.

"EWN-001 through–" Ivo had begun, before a headache-induced flash of insight caused Wily to cut him off.

"No, Ivo," Dr. Wily stopped his partner. "He's too good at leading others on a wild goose chase. Let the Egg Denizens take care of him while the roboticized masters end our eternal headaches for us. Besides, we know where Blues is going. So long as we get there first, we can set up some 'surprises' for him."

"Yes..." Eggman mused. "You're quite right. Why, I don't know what came over me!"

"I'm afraid these 'heroes' can bring that out in even the best of us my friend," Wily sympathized.

"Yes, they do tend to thwart genius like ours by not playing their roles properly, don't they?" Eggman mused darkly.

"Perhaps we should return to our base," Wily suggested. "Front row seats like these are wonderful, but we do still have some work to finish. Eyes on the prize and all that."

"Of course," Eggman agreed, "of course. Good thing we installed those portable surveillance monitors, though, right? Work *and* entertainment all at once!"

"Oh, yes! Quite the inspired idea of yours!" Wily agreed as the doctors made their way back to their base. (8)

The battle with the roboticized masters was shaping up to be rather difficult. The allied robots and mobians were all quite skilled and experienced, but they were also decidedly outnumbered by powerful opponents.

Roll, Tails, Ray, and Tango had been effectively separated from the rest of the group. They were being pinned down by half of the roboticized masters and slowly overwhelmed.

In fact, Roll felt the only thing keeping her in the game was what appeared to be a heightened state of situational awareness. An almost zen-like battle state where she could react to her opponents as fast as they were able to threaten her. If she didn't know better, she'd swear someone was whispering the right moves to make directly into her mind. She was currently engaged with the tonfa-like Electric Blades of Acorn Woman when such an insight came to her.

Behind you. Duck.

Dropping to the ground, she avoided the energy-draining blades of Shade Woman and backed away from the stealth-black robot...

MINE! Ray Glide!

And straight toward one of her Stealth Mines that promptly exploded. Fortunately, the quick switch to the Ray Glide weapon reduced the damage to minimal and allowed her to ride the explosion upwards where she saw Tails dealing with the trio of Bunny Woman, Cool Man, and Boomer Man while Tango sowed confusion among Mighty Man, Marine Woman, and Cream Woman. Ray tackled Acorn Woman from behind, leaving her a clear opening to take down Shade Woman.

Using the Ray Glide to ride the air, she came down into a dive that Shade Woman failed to dodge, sending them both into a skid that Roll was in significantly more control of. She dismissed the Ray Glide and began charging up her Mega Buster for a Spin Dash Blast as she essentially surfed her opponent across the ground, unleashing the blast and vaulting off the robot in a single motion.

She took note of the female anthropomorphic figure – an echidna? Maybe? – in what appeared to be a special ops bodysuit as she grabbed the nearly-black orb and absorbed the Stealth Mine weapon, turning black and gray. (9)

"One down!" Hermes exclaimed in triumph as he continued the feed of subconscious communication to his portion of the battlefield.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 58%

Sonic was doing his best to support Rock since Blues, along with Beat, failed to draw away any of their opponents. The robo-dog rush was doing his best to help, but even then, the best he was managing was knocking their opponents off balance for a second or two so Rock would have a chance to blast them. He hadn't even had enough of a breather to whip something out something from his subspace pocket.

Shadow Man on your six.

Sonic didn't even question where the intuition came from, he just whipped around in time to see Shadow Man getting a bead on Rock with his Chaos Cannon.

"Rock! Look ou–" the blue blur was cut off as he dove between the blue bomber and his opponent to take the temporal stasis blast meant for the other.

Fortunately, Rock didn't hesitate a moment longer than Sonic. His color shifted to orange and white even as the hedgehog was shouting his warning. As Sonic took the blast meant for Rock, the robot was firing a shot of the Tail Wind at the roboticized assailant.

"–t!" Sonic gasped as Shadow Man went down, and the temporal distortion ended. He was up and running interference an instant later as Rock charged up his make-it-all-better beam and restored Shadow to normal, taking the orb with his weapon as well.

"Hey Shadow!" Sonic called out to his dark rival as Rock's armor turned black and red. "We could use some breathing room here!"

The genetically engineered 'ultimate lifeform' unlocked his limiter rings and began glowing red as he dove into the middle of the remaining roboticized masters. (10)

"CHAOS BLAST!"

Sonic grinned as he pulled out one of the swords he'd snagged from those variant Loops where he kept getting sucked into storybooks. It wasn't Caliburn – Sonic had no idea where the looping artifact, known by most as Excalibur, had gotten to these last few subjective centuries – but it would do. (11)

Hephaestus nodded to himself as he continued to type away, doing his best aiding the loopers in their battle.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 56%

Shade – who apparently was indeed an echidna – had recovered quickly and engaged Acorn Woman with Roll as Ray went to help keep the rest of the roboticized masters occupied. The plan was to distract their opponents as much as possible while Roll restored them one-by-one. Hopefully it would keep working.

Lead her into a mine.

As Shade crossed her energy draining blades with Acorn Woman's electric ones, Roll set one of the Stealth Mines behind the latter and switched to her Mega Buster as she motioned for Shade to lead Acorn Woman into the mine.

The explosion went off and downed the female robot just as Roll finished charging. A moment later and there was a female anthropomorphic ground squirrel in boots, gloves, bicycle shorts, and a blue vest rubbing her head next to an electric blue orb.

"Give me a moment," the female squirrel said, shaking off her disorientation as Roll absorbed her master weapon, the Electric Blades, and turned brown and blue. A pair of bracelets on the squirrel woman's arms hummed to life and produced a pair of energy blades identical to what her robot form had possessed. (12)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 54%

"CHAOS CANNON!" Rock yelled as he blasted Silver Man, only to take a hit from Blaze Woman before Shadow could engage her. Nonetheless, he switched to his Mega Buster and reached full charge as the temporal stasis field around Silver Man collapsed and the two fired at each other.

Rock's memories of such a cross-counter blast of energy happening before restored themselves as the two shots effectively proved no impediment to each other and both hit their targets full-on. Rock

struggled against the psychokinetic field produced by the Psycho Burst for a moment before the restored Silver made himself known.

"Sorry about that," the temporally displaced looping hedgehog apologized as he raised his glowing arm towards Rock. "Let me see what I can do." (13)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 52%

Cool Man and Bunny Woman had broken off from Tails, Ray, and Tango to engage Roll. Fortunately, Shade was able to waylay Bunny Woman while Roll and Sally, the squirrel woman and apparently princess, double-teamed Cool Man.

The energy of Roll's Electric Blades arced around the coyote-styled robot's Trick Sword and stunned him when the two clashed, allowing Sally to score a disabling shot from behind while Roll charged up the shot to restore the roboticized master to normal.

One blast later, and Roll was being hastily introduced to one Antoine D'Coolette as she absorbed the Trick Sword, turning red and brown.

"Madame!" the coyote mobian pleaded frantically, gesturing at Bunny Woman. "You must help my wife!" (14)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 50%

The now teal and white, with helmet colors reversed, Rock made his way towards Blaze Woman as Silver shielded him from stray shots. The fire-based roboticized master had decided to engulf herself in a pillar of flame that made her impossible to physically approach, making it imperative that they restore her next.

Rock fired the Psycho Burst weapon straight through the flame, causing it to dissipate and Blaze Woman to freeze in place. Trusting Silver to cover him, he switched over to his Mega Buster and charged up a Spin Dash Blast before firing on the robotic pyromaniac.

"Ugh," Blaze the Cat muttered as she was restored to normal. "That was no more pleasant than last time. Thank you again." (15)

"Any time," Rock smiled as he collected the weapon orb for the Fire Tornado, turning violet and white.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 48%

Bunny Woman's laser weapon was immensely powerful, but it appeared that while the Trick Sword of Cool Man was highly conductive, it was also very reflective in nature. Turning away the laser blasts with ease, Roll kept Bunny Woman distracted while her allies surprised her from behind and pinned her arms long enough for her to charge and fire the restoration blast from her Mega Buster.

As she picked up the weapon orb for the Rabbot Laser, turning brown and pink, she saw the rabbit woman, *who still had three robotic limbs* , blink in disorientation before grabbing the coyote in a hug.

"Sugah 'Twan!" the cybernetic rabbit cried in a southern drawl. "Ah was afraid ah'd never see ya again!"

Roll blinked at the mobian cyborg. "Er, are you sure you're fully restored?"

An explosion sounded, and the group turned to see a swarm of little blue robots, all crying 'omochao' in mechanical voices, cover the battlefield.

"Maybe ah should fill y'all in later..." the cyber-lagomorph replied, wide-eyed at the latest development. (16)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 46%

Rock's memories of the fighting styles of the roboticized masters were restoring faster and faster. Thus he knew full well how painful dueling Rose Woman and her Piko Hammers could be. And so he didn't hesitate for a second to use the Fire Tornado on her full blast.

A quick charge and shot with his altered Mega Buster, and the pink hedgehog was shaking out the cobwebs of returning to her normal body as Rock picked up her weapon orb, changed colors to red and pink, and rushed towards the next roboticized master. (17)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 44%

The restored mobians were desperately fending off the swarm of robotic Omochao sentinels as Roll blasted her way through with the Rabbot Laser in search of the source.

She found it in the form of a smaller lagomorph-model roboticized master, Cream Woman, floating in mid-air and fired. The small robot was taken off guard and fell to the ground as Roll switched out her weapon and charged up to restore the roboticized master. At the last moment, one of the Omochao sentinels placed itself in the path of the blast.

Roll shielded her eyes from the double flash of light and saw not only a young rabbit girl – one who had to be years younger than Kalinka was when she and Roll first met – but also a non-robotic Omochao thing.

"Cheese!" the rabbit girl cried in worry and relief.

"Chao!" the blue organic Omochao-like thing returned, flying to embrace the girl.

Roll began fuming as the swarm of Omochaos began falling to the ground without their master to guide them. *'A child?! Eggman! Wily! You utter bastards!'* (18)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 42%

Rock's acquired Piko Hammer met the Sharp Knuckle of Knuckles Man head-on, and the latter broke.

A pounce from Rush and a spin dash from Sonic as he switched weapons and charged up were all the distraction needed to restore the next of Sonic's allies. (19)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 40%

A furious cream and red Roll fired Omochao after Omochao as she closed in on the super-strong Mighty Man. She needed to vent some frustration and this roboticized master looked like he was armored enough take it. The Omochao sentinels dodged the powerful punches of Mighty Man and knocked him off balance as Roll switched weapons and charged. In both senses of the word.

Getting close to Mighty Man, she leveled her blaster point-blank at his torso and fired.

"Ugh," the armadillo mobian coughed as he was restored. "Anger management issues much?" (20)

"Sorry," Roll apologized. "I saw what Eggman and Wily did to that poor rabbit child and I had to hurt something."

"Understandab–" the armadillo man started before his eyes widened.

Behind you!

Roll was turning and grabbing Mighty Man's weapon orb before the flash of insight even came. Turning red and yellow, she equipped the Mighty Blow weapon and punched–

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 38%

–shattering the sonic energy from the Acoustic Blaster of Vector man. The red and white Rock winced at the mild recoil doing that with the Sharp Knuckle incurred before re-engaging the crocodilian Vector Man.

"Unacceptable levels of resistance," Vector Man intoned mechanically as Rock dueled him at close range. "Self-destruct option authorized. Self-destruct of remaining units in two minutes fifteen sec–"

Rock laid the roboticized master out with a blow to the head and wasted no time restoring him to normal and grabbing his weapon orb (21). Turning green and lime as he equipped it, he focused on locating Charmy Man. He had to restore the remaining allies of Sonic quickly. There was no time to waste.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 36%

The revelation of a self-destruct option from the walrus-model Boomer Man made Roll's circuits go cold as she deflected another blast of the Shockwave Boomer around her with the Mighty Blow. She had to step things up.

Marine Woman was being kept busy by Tails, Ray, and most of their restored allies until she finished with Boomer Man, so there was minimal chance of interference from an outside source as she charged Boomer Man and laid him out with a powerful body blow.

Roll quickly switched out and restored Boomer Man to normal (22). Ignoring the walrus as he shook himself free of disorientation, she grabbed his weapon orb and equipped it, turning purple and yellow as she did, and turned to face the last of this half of the roboticized masters.

Only for a wall of water originating from Marine Woman to erupt, flinging all of her allies every which way.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 34%

Charmy Man had proved annoyingly agile and able to evade attacks from not only Rock but also Sonic and his allies for a whole minute.

"Submit to termination," the bee-themed robot announced. "Self-destruct in one min-bzzt!"

Fortunately, Rock had recalled that the Acoustic Blaster was chargeable, and the larger blast was much harder to avoid.

Walking up to the downed roboticized master, Rock switched weapons, charged his Mega Buster, and fired.

"I don't feel good..." Charmy Bee moaned. (23)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 32%

Roll had barely withstood the torrent of water Marine Woman unleashed, but withstood it she had. Now she was looking at a

roboticized master encased in protective water and free to fire her Hydrokinesis weapon at will.

But then, Roll was well aware that sound traveled quite well in water. The Shockwave Boomer didn't even lose a decibel as it plowed through the aquatic protections and downed the raccoon-model robot.

Roll restored Marine Woman and felt another jab of fury as she beheld that the mobian was a girl roughly the same age as the rabbit. Did Eggman and Wily have no shame?!

"All hands on deck, ye cobbers," muttered the raccoon youth. "Yer captain demands it, mates... Avast and ready the main cannons..."

Roll blinked as she collected the weapon orb, turning green and brown, and stared at the girl in confusion. (24)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 30%

"Well, that looks like everyone," Sonic sighed in relief as Rock collected Charmy Man's weapon orb and turned black and yellow.

"Is it?" Knuckles asked, uncertain. "I don't see Espio."

Sonic's eyes suddenly widened in a panic when he realized he had no idea where the ninja was, or had been for most of the battle.

"Where...?" he began, only to be cut off as Rock casually fired the Rapid Stinger over his shoulder, hitting a cloaked Espio Man who was directly behind him in the process.

Without even turning around, Rock switched to his Mega Buster, charged up, and restored the chameleon to normal.

"Heh," a groggy Espio snorted. "How did you know?"

"Let's see," Rock smirked. "You were a ninja robot programmed for silent elimination of the enemy with a clear shot at my back. Where *else* would you have struck?" (25)

Espio chuckled at that and stood up, picking up his weapon orb as he did so.

"The Chroma Camo," he declared as he gave it to Rock. "May you do as well with it this time as you did the last."

"I promise," Rock bowed respectfully, turning purple and black as he absorbed the weapon into his databanks.

Hephaestus blinked from where he'd been about to hit the 'enter' key on his terminal and send the subconscious communique to Rock. "Huh. He didn't even need help for that one."

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 28%

"Hey, Hephaestus?" Hermes called from his own terminal. "Why the heck are the numbers still dropping when our boys are clearly winning?

"Obviously the doctors have something very nasty in store in case they get desperate," Hephaestus postulated, "and with each decisive victory our loopers achieve, the more likely that desperation gambit becomes."

Dr. Light sighed in his cramped cell as the two mad doctors walked away. Really, what was the point in chiding him over his choice in facial hair? Albert had gone around the bend before, but he seemed even more unhinged than usual.

A sound outside his cell caused him to look up, and when he did he beheld an anthropomorphic bat woman that he knew he'd never seen before. Despite this, some part of his mind *insisted* she was

familiar. The bird on her shoulder however, was completely unfamiliar even to the feeling of deja vu.

"Dr. Light, I presume," the bat woman smirked in greeting. The bird on her shoulder simply considered him with an unusually acute intelligence in its eyes.

"Why, yes," the scientist blinked in surprise. "May I ask who you and your companion are?"

"You can call me Rouge," the bat woman smiled. "I'm a spy, and right now your best friend. My colleague here is called Omega. He's a flicky who normally serves as the biological AI of my heavy artillery support." (26)

The bird chirped smugly.

"Indeed," Dr. Light raised an eyebrow. A strange concept, but he'd come across stranger.

"The only reason he's out is because this mission requires stealth instead of muscle," Rouge continued, ignoring Omega's displeased look. "We were in the middle of an investigation when one of the Copy Robots abducted our partner, a mistake on her part. She made this personal."

Dr. Light was impressed with Rouge's knowledge and resourcefulness, and told her so. As he did, Omega flew off to examine something nearby.

"Oh, honey," Rouge dismissed, clearly flattered. "You have *no* idea."

"Are you here to rescue me?" he asked her.

"Yes and no–" Rouge was cut off by an alarmed chirp from Omega, but before she could react a clear tube had sprung out of the floor straight to the ceiling, entrapping her in it. Omega tried to fly away, but an electrical arc stunned the bird and deposited him on a portion

of floor that disgorged a clear tube around his form like the one that held Rouge.

"Oh, bravo Ivo!" came the cheery voice of Albert Wily applauding from the doorway. "Superb catch!"

"Oh, you flatterer!" Dr. Ivo 'Eggman' Robotnik returned in a teasingly coy manner. "As if you didn't predict a rescue might be attempted!"

"Eggman! Wily!" Rouge spat angrily. "Just what do you think you're going to accomplish with this?!"

"Oh, nothing much," Eggman grinned. "Just finishing up the membership of our roboticized masters."

"Like you can keep me from breaking out between here and there," Rouge taunted.

"Between...?" Dr. Wily began in confusion before both doctors cracked up laughing.

"Oh, my dear Rouge," Eggman wiped a tear of mirth from his eye. "You always had the best sense of humor. The robiticization chamber is this very room! It was Albert's genius idea to make it and the prison cells in the same place so when we caught someone trying to free a prisoner, there wouldn't be any fuss at all! Just spring a trap and flip a switch!"

Rouge's eyes widened in horror.

"Speaking of switches, Ivo," Wily gestured to one on the wall. "Would you do the honors?"

"Why, thank you Albert!" Eggman grinned as he did exactly that. Energy coursed over Rouge and her avian companion and when it subsided, there were two more members of Eggman and Wily's forces standing in the room.

"Be grateful, Thomas! For you bear witness to the most dangerous of our roboticized masters!" Wily cackled as he and his partner prepared to finish the introduction in unison.

"Rouge Woman and Omega Man!"

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1) Don't you hate those memories you can't quite grasp?

2) As if this situation needed *more* problems.

3) The Sonicverse has been running primarily on a game-based variant with some interesting fanon history and a characterization of Eggman based on some stuff from the comic *Ruins Of The Fourth Wall* by Jen Irwin instead of a canon baseline until... this Loop actually.

4) Zeus: The divine politician. Dr. Wily: Mad scientist and would-be conqueror randomly accessing Loop memories. Can I get a refund on this recipe?

5) The Copy Robots are jerks.

6) How you make Cool Shades even cooler.

7) I had to wiki all of my Skaia/Homestuck knowledge. That said, anyone who's familiar with that continuity fubar is probably getting a sinking feeling right about now. Assuming they hadn't already.

8) Dr. Wily just got Dr. Eggman to drop the Villain Ball. That sinking feeling is getting stronger.

9) Shade the Echidna's only game appearance to date is *Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood* where she starts out as part of the bad guy group, the Nocturnus Clan, but has a change of heart. She's a stealth expert, martial artist, and military strategist. While her main weapon is a pair of energy-draining blades, she's also known

to use explosives and I didn't have a bomb weapon among the roboticized masters yet, so...

She's only been in Archie Comics in the alternate reality "Another Time Another Place" to promote the game she appears in, but with the recent continuity reset, I'm hopeful that she'll return.

10) Shadow the Hedgehog, arguably Sonic's biggest rival. First appearing in *Sonic Adventure 2* , Shadow is one of the few Sonic characters besides Sonic himself to star in his own game, appropriately named *Shadow the Hedgehog* . I'd expect that anyone who's been paying any attention to Sonic media in the past decade or so to know who he is.

11) Caliburn, the talking sword from *Sonic and the Black Knight* . Also known as the one true Excalibur. As a 'Looping Artifact', he essentially can't be duplicated in much the same way loopers can't (and you know *someone's* tried), and he doesn't have to follow anyone through the Loops he doesn't want to. Many other blades in the multiverse bear the name Excalibur, but they're not the 'real thing', though Caliburn would freely admit that the imitation is quite flattering. He and Sonic parted ways after the latter stopped using the former regularly during the Loops. While still friends, both will admit that weapons aren't really Sonic's style.

12) Princess Sally Acorn of the Archie Comics *Sonic the Hedgehog* series. Princess of the kingdom Dr. Ivo "Eggman" Robotnik conquered when she was a child, leader of the Freedom Fighters, ground squirrel, chief love interest of Sonic's comic incarnation, and all-around badass. She's in her post-continuity-reset form here. She has these awesome bracelets that can form energy blades mounted on her wrists, and since I was having trouble thinking of a decent master weapon for her prior to her re-introduction, I snapped this up.

Trivia: Those energy blades? They originated pre-continuity-reset after Eggman roboticized her (long story) and installed them as weapons. And the reset retconned them to her personal weapon-of-choice.

13) Silver the Hedgehog made his debut in *Sonic the Hedgehog (2006)* . He's a time traveller from an ill-defined future sent to the past to avert catastrophe in all his canon incarnations, and boy does *that* have to be a headache for Hermes, the admin of the Sonicverse. The walking paradox that is the Time Eater would probably be on lockdown though.

14) Antoine D'Coolette. Boy did his roboticized master name take a while for me to hash out. Anyway, he's also from the Archie Comics series and in post-continuity-reset form. Antoine's interesting. He started out among the Freedom Fighters as the designated comic relief butt-monkey with a bad French accent and has since graduated to bonafide badass swordsman and debonair romantic. Oh, and he's a coyote.

15) Blaze the Cat actually isn't from Sonic's dimension. She's from an alternate dimension of the Sonicverse called the Sol Dimension which has a set of flame-based Sol Emeralds instead of the Chaos Emeralds, and her instead of Sonic. She and her home dimension first appeared in *Sonic Rush* .

16) Meet Bunnie Rabbot-D'Coolette, 100% southern belle and Antoine's canon wife. Like her husband, she's from the Archie Comics series, and she had two cybernetic legs and one cybernetic arm (her left). Pre-continuity-reset, this was due to partial roboticization, but post-continuity-reset it was due to a life-saving medical procedure. She's in the latter incarnation, like the rest of the Freedom Fighters, which is kinda funny since the continuity reset I keep talking about happened as a *result* of the Worlds Collide crossover, which is essentially what's currently happening. Aren't the Loops fun?

Anyway, her cybernetic limbs come with all sorts of cool options and she's gone toe-to-toe with several of the heavy hitters in her universe, like Metal Sonic.

17) Amy Rose first appeared in *Sonic the Hedgehog CD* , and she's been stalking the blue blur ever since under the impression they

were meant to be together. It gets kinda creepy at times, even to characters that aren't Sonic, but she's otherwise a good person and a strong ally.

18) Cream the Rabbit and her chao Cheese, one of the punniest duos in the gaming industry. Both first appeared in *Sonic Advance 2* . They're surprisingly capable as combatants, and have been known to defeat opponents that even give Sonic a hard time. Oh, and did I mention that she's *six* in the baseline?

The Omochao weapon on the other hand is a direct reference to the robotic chao of the same name introduced in *Sonic Adventure* . He acts as a guide, and a number of gamers tend to feel about him the same way they feel about 'annoying fairy guides'.

19) Knuckles the Echidna, Sonic's very first rival from all the way back in *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* first released in 1994. I really shouldn't have to say any more than that.

20) Mighty the Armadillo originated in the arcade game *SegaSonic the Hedgehog* along with Ray, but he's probably better known for his appearance in *Knuckles' Chaotix* . He wasn't really developed much in the games and seems to have been dropped from the Chaotix line-up there, but his Archie Comics incarnation is another story. There he's super-strong, enough to swing a tank by the gun barrel, and extremely tough.

I think I missed my chance to make an Armored Armadillo reference though. Dangit.

21) Vector the Crocodile, the leader of the Chaotix (we saw him earlier before he was roboticized). Depending on which continuity you ask, the Chaotix are a bunch of bumbling detectives or fellow defenders of Knuckles' homeland, the floating island. Regardless, Vector's a brawler who likes music and seems to frequently wind up in debt. First appeared in *Knuckles' Chaotix* .

22) The last of the Freedom Fighters from the Archie Comics series, Rotor "Boomer" Walrus. Pre-continuity-reset, he was a definitively portly mechanic who wasn't really suited to front-line fighting. Post-continuity reset, he's a buff battle mechanic who beats up robots by *throwing them into other robots* . Guess which incarnation I picked. Yep, the latter one.

Rotor's roboticized master weapon actually comes from his pre-continuity-reset incarnation though, where he built a power suit with wrist-mounted sound-energy cannons (why is a long story). There was some tweaking though. Mechanics like Rotor do that.

23) Charmy Bee is another member of the Chaotix originating in *Knuckles' Chaotix* . He's depicted as having a kid-like attitude, but his actual canon age could be anywhere from six to sixteen depending on which continuity you're asking.

24) Marine the Raccoon got her start in *Sonic Rush Adventure* where she's a sea captain with her own ship (despite being seven). At the end of it, she uses a mystery power that some believe could be hydrokinesis, so I took that and ran with it as a baseline power she's further honed over the Loops. Her depicted personality that I'm familiar with I've interpreted as the following three words: Hyperactive Australian Pirate.

25) The last of the Chaotix, Espio the Chameleon. He debuted in *Knuckles' Chaotix* and is a badass ninja. So, Rock's pretty much on the dot here.

26) Ah, Rouge the Bat and E-123 Omega (in flicky form), Shadow's fellow teammates on Team Dark. Rouge is a jewel thief and part-time secret agent introduced in *Sonic Adventure 2* . She's looping. E-123 Omega is a renegade creation of Dr. Eggman introduced in *Sonic Heroes* . He's *not* looping.

Omega as a flicky-in-a-robot is a call-back to E-102 Gamma from Sonic Adventure and the rest of the E-Series robots from that game who *were* flickies that needed to be rescued. Whether or not Omega

is the same way is a question that hasn't been answered yet. But I needed him to be biological in some way in order to make him a roboticized master, so a flicky (with the ability to exit his robot body, and a marked preference for being inside it) he became.

Sorry for the infodump there. Hope I didn't bury anyone. Here's a TLDR rundown of Sonicverse loopers and allies:

Sonic the Hedgehog - Anchor for every variant of his branch where a version of 'Sonic' exists.

Blaze the Cat - Linked Loop Anchor for the rest of the 'Sonic' branch of Yggdrasil.

Miles "Tails" Prower - Oldest looper aside from Sonic.

Marine the Raccoon - Only other known looper in Blaze's section.

Knuckles the Echidna - First rival of Sonic to start looping.

Amy Rose - Looper who almost went Sakura Syndrome. Sonic still gives her a wide berth if at all possible.

Shadow the Hedgehog - Looping rival of Sonic.

Vector the Crocodile - First member of the Chaotix to start looping.

Espio the Chameleon - Chaotix looper.

Charmy Bee - Chaotix looper.

Rouge the Bat - Looping sometimes-ally of Shadow.

Cream the Rabbit - Looping friend of Amy (Cheese may or may not be looping. Cream isn't saying and no one else can really tell).

Mighty the Armadillo - Chaotix looper.

Silver the Hedgehog - Looper with some wonky code due to being a baseline time traveler. Essentially, he Awakens when he 'comes to the past' and any time he returns to the future outside what's 'required', his participation (Awake or otherwise) in that Loop ends

Shade the Echidna - Most recent looper pre-Crash.

Princess Sally Acorn - New looper activated by the Crash.

Antoine D'Coolette - New looper activated by the Crash.

Bunnie Rabbot - New looper activated by the Crash.

Rotor "Boomer" Walrus - New looper activated by the Crash.

Ray the Flying Squirrel - New Chaotix looper activated by the Crash.

Big the Cat - While Big is not truly stupid, his outlook on life is so thoroughly simple that his behavior wouldn't change even if he *was* looping.

E-123 Omega - Not looping, though still thoroughly badass. I fear the day he gets access to a subspace pocket since the only thing he'd use it for is more ammunition.

Loop 1 Part 4: Skull Egg Zone

Mega Loop 1.0 part 4: Across the Skull Egg Zone! Destination: Wily Egg!

"Okay..." Hermes' mind raced for possibilities as to how they could try and fix the situation. "Could we use a local aspect of ourselves as a backdoor and slip down there personally?"

"Two big problems with that," Hephaestus replied. "First is that our local aspects have been turned into minions of Eggman and Wily, and I'm not wild about plugging my mind directly into something like that no matter how easy it would be to usurp control. Second, if either of us has our consciousness down there while the Loop isn't yet stable and the activation attempt fails..."

"...there's a chance we could possibly end up with brain damage, turning us into divine vegetables," Hermes finished (1). "Right. Bad idea. Damnit, there has to be something we can do! It's like everything we're doing here is just making it worse!"

"And the moment we stop, they'll face something where our intervention is actually critical to the success of this attempt," Hephaestus returned flatly. "I know how these things tend to work, same as you do."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," Hermes grumped.

Hephaestus smirked. "Welcome to my existence."

With the restoration of Sonic's friends and allies to normal, the groups reconvened and introductions were had all around.

As it turned out, Sonic's home Loop was part of a Linked Loop, with Blaze the Cat being the only other Anchor that held down every part of their 'branch' of Yggdrasil that Sonic couldn't. The only other looper from her section was Marine the Raccoon, a hyperactive young sea captain with what sounded like an Australian accent on International Talk Like a Pirate Day. Even Blaze admitted her friend took some getting used to.

On Sonic's side, there was of course Miles 'Tails' Prower, the oldest looper aside from Sonic himself. After the fox, Knuckles the Echidna had been the earliest looper and Sonic's first 'rival' to start looping. Amy Rose had come next, and she'd reportedly flirted with a mental condition called Sakura Syndrome. It seemed Sakura Syndrome was a special type of insanity that could affect loopers when they failed to handle the stressful nature of the Loops and stopped considering the consequences of actions that sane people would normally see as abhorrent. She'd apparently skirted the edge of this state for long enough that Sonic was still a bit nervous around her.

The Chaotix were a team that were sometimes detectives and other times fellow guardians of Knuckles's homeland. Vector the Crocodile was the oldest looper among them followed by the ninja Espio the Chameleon, the hyperactive Charmy Bee, the super-strong and super-tough Mighty the Armadillo, and finally the somewhat nervous yet capable Ray the Flying Squirrel who had started looping as a result of the Crash.

Shadow the Hedgehog had started looping about mid-way between when Sonic had been made an Anchor and now, and only one of his two normal teammates, neither of whom were present, was looping. After him there was the physically young Cream the Rabbit and her chao Cheese, the latter of whom might or might not be looping. Cream seemed to know, but found the fact that no one else did amusing enough to keep the secret.

Silver the Hedgehog was some sort of time-traveler, but the Loops resolved that fact in such a way that he always Awoke after traveling to the past and returning to 'his' time outside a stable time loop event

caused his participation in that Loop to end. Silver had related that this was likely due to his native time period being generally ill-defined or corrupted in Yggdrasil's system when individuals from Sonic's era weren't involved. Then there was Shade the Echidna, the youngest looper pre-Crash, who apparently had the tendency to Awaken with the name Julie-Su every so often. Sonic and his allies agreed that this state of affairs was a testament to how screwy the Loops could be at times.

After them were the four Freedom Fighters; Princess Sally Acorn as the leader with her non-looping pocket computer NICOLE that she had kept in her subspace pocket, battle mechanic Rotor 'Boomer' Walrus, coyote swordsman Antoine D'Coolette, and his cybernetic wife Bunnie Rabbot-D'Coolette. All of them were loopers who had been 'shaken loose' as a result of the Crash like Ray, and it seemed the newest loopers actually had the clearest baseline memories out of anyone in the crowd. Bunnie's three cybernetic limbs were explained as a result of a life-saving medical procedure, at least this life anyway, and thus something she was supposed to have. Sonic had explained that nearly every version of Bunnie he'd come across before she'd started looping had ended up with mechanical limbs for one reason or another.

And finally there was some possibility of another looper having been activated by the Crash. Tails was still hoping for the not-really-evil version of Eggman he was used to, who was clearly not Awake this time regardless if he'd begun looping or not, but a number of the others had money on a new looper in Blaze's section or someone named Big the Cat. However, Sonic had related that Big's outlook on life was so thoroughly simple; fish, sleep, help his friends when needed, and basically pal around with his pet Froggy; that he could have been looping since before Knuckles and none of them would be able to tell.

Talking amongst each other, the large group decided that splitting up to make their way to the Wily Egg was best. Sonic and Tails would stay with Rock and Roll as the main group. Knuckles would take the

Chaotix and try to catch up with Blues and inform him of the situation as well as offer aid in case he needed help. Blaze would take Marine, Amy, Cream (with Cheese), and Silver on ahead and try to take out threats to the main group. Sally and the rest of the Freedom Fighters would circle around and see if they could find any less hazardous routes to take towards their objective. And no one was quite certain where Shade had snuck off to while they were discussing how to divide up the groups, which left Shadow who had decided to go off on his own to try and find his missing colleagues.

In all honesty, if he'd been thinking straight he would have realized that he might find them faster by staying with the main group.

Omega Man stood before a hulking robotic behemoth whose head was wreathed in flames.

"Egg Denizen: Forge," the roboticized master ordered. "You are required by the masters of this Zone, Drs. Eggman and Wily, to accompany this unit to eliminate the opposition of priority ones: Sonic the Hedgehog and Mega Man as well as their allies."

Elsewhere, Rouge Woman was making an identical request of a sleek machine identified as Egg Denizen: Racer. They would join up with Omega Man and Egg Denizen: Forge for a full assault on the enemies of the doctors. (2)

Blues had been making his way along the mountain trail he'd found when he was blindsided by two robots the size of trucks. One appeared to be a male-form humanoid robot floating in a Buddhist-style meditative position and a laser in its forehead while the second was a lithe female-form model with arm-mounted weapons that appeared similar to crossbows. The first had self-identified as Egg Denizen: Prophet and the second as Egg Denizen: Hunter.

Blues could have handily taken out either on their own, but both at once was proving troublesome. He was contemplating doing

something reckless from where he was pinned down behind his shield when the cavalry arrived.

The red form his restoring memories recognized as Knuckles slammed hard into Egg Denizen: Prophet and knocked it off-balance. An armadillo he didn't recall from the original timeline at all landed atop Egg Denizen: Hunter and punched it hard enough to dislodge the machine from its perch on the cliff.

"Hey Pogo Man!" came the shout of Vector, leading Espio, Charmy, and Ray in a charge to reinforce Blues personally. "Looks like we found you just in time!"

Blues shook his head, wondering how a complete goof like Vector somehow managed to be a good enough detective to actually find him when Dr. Wily often couldn't. He chalked it up to one of the eternal mysteries of the multiverse and rejoined the battle. (3)

Princess Sally Acorn directed her fellow Freedom Fighters expertly after they'd been ambushed by a surprisingly female Eggman creation that identified itself as Egg Denizen: General. The problem wasn't so much the machine itself, but the small army of smaller robots it brought with it.

Currently Bunnie and Rotor were unleashing as much widespread destruction among the smaller robots as they could with Bunnie's built-in cybernetic armaments and a few of Rotor's inventions. This left her and Antoine to engage the 'General' with their respective blades.

It might have gone a bit better if Eggman's robot hadn't been skilled with a blade as well.

Shadow was cursing his luck. Not only had he not found either Rouge or Omega, but he'd been accosted by something calling itself Egg Denizen: Harvest. That could control the local plant life.

Damnit, he didn't have *time* for this!

Blaze and company had spotted four robots moving towards Rock and Sonic's group, but before they could intervene they were attacked by a pair of large robots themselves.

The first was clearly female, and exquisitely designed. Aside from that, it didn't seem to do anything other than radiate an energy field that caused disorientation. It called itself Egg Denizen: Princess.

The other was the standard kind of mecha that Eggman liked to use. Egg Denizen: Knight carried a shield and a brutal-looking sword. Such an opponent would normally be easy for a group like theirs, but with the disorientation field up, it was looking like a tough battle was ahead.

The attack had come out of nowhere. One moment Sonic had been moving right along with his group, and the next he'd been blindsided by something the size of a car and moving as fast as himself.

"What the heck are you supposed to be?!" he called out as he peeled himself away from the robot and began running alongside it.

"Egg Denizen: Racer," the bot replied.

Sonic blinked, and then grinned. *'I do believe that was a challenge.'* (4)

Tails looked up at his opponent. Neck-craning up. Sonic had been removed from the field and the other two opponents that had arrived needed to be dealt with by Rock and Roll since they were clearly roboticized masters and only those two were able to restore them to normal.

They'd left Rush and Tango to help him, but Tails was thinking that he might need some heavier artillery as his opponent was the size of a small house. And what he hadn't forked over to Shadow needed to be saved for the robot master army he knew was coming later. The one that could keep getting back up every time they were destroyed thanks to the fuzzy time/space of the Zone. And Tails *knew* their luck wasn't good enough for that to have changed as a result of the Skaia merge.

"Hey, big guy," he chuckled nervously. "What's your name?"

"Egg," the machine shook the earth as it punctuated the statement by stomping one foot.

"Denizen," the earth shook again as the other foot was used, and then the flames surrounding the robot's head flared intensely as it prepared for battle.

"Forge."

Rock was quickly finding out that Rouge Woman was not the pushover she'd been the first time around. Then, she'd been one more robot master-level opponent among many in the middle of an incredibly chaotic melee where keeping track of all combatants was impossible. Then, it had been relatively easy to catch her off-guard and blast her back to normal.

Now? Now it was proving somewhat more difficult. Now Rock had her undivided attention while her companion squared off with his sister, and she was proving very competent.

"Gah!" he cried out as he took a glancing hit from the Black Wave weapon and fell under the stunning effect. Completely immobile, he couldn't defend himself as Rouge Woman flew forward and kicked him square in the torso.

Rock tumbled across the battlefield and assessed his options. Her targeting systems were extremely good, her weapon fired blasts as big as his charged shots, and even a glancing blow from one left him stunned and defenseless to a follow-up strike.

Okay, threat assessed. What were his options?

Roll dodged another barrage of bullets from Omega Man and took cover behind a convenient boulder. She'd taken a couple of hits already and she really couldn't afford to take any more.

The Omega Gatling relentlessly chewed up nearly any cover she could spot. In addition, the near-constant barrage meant she was having trouble assessing her options for negating or overcoming the weapon. She didn't have much that could outright block it, and of that even fewer could be used offensively. (5)

And if she didn't strike a decisive blow, she'd likely not get a second shot.

'Think, Roll,' she ordered her processor. *'Think, think, think!'*

Egg Denizen: Racer was not only fast, he was brutal and relentless in his attacks. It was taking practically all of Sonic's concentration just to keep pace and dodge at the moment, leaving precious little to counter-attack with.

Then he heard the familiar sound of Shadow cursing up a storm and decided that a change of tactics was in order.

"Hey Shadow!" he called as he led his own opponent towards the other melee between the ultimate lifeform and a robot that could command plants. "Trade ya!"

"I don't need your help!" Shadow yelled, but still turned towards his rival, hands glowing yellow. "CHAOS SPEAR!"

Sonic grinned as the burst of energy slammed into his opponent and vaulted over Shadow, wreathing himself in flames. It had been a while since he broke out his fire-based abilities, but a plant-based opponent was the perfect opportunity to dust them off.

"Okay," Knuckles growled. "These two are good."

The fight against the Egg Denizens was not going as quickly as they'd hoped. Hunter and Prophet were simply too coordinated with each other. They'd struck some decent blows, but nothing decisive yet.

"We need to at least disable one of their weapons," Espio agreed.

"I know just the one," Blues stated as his Sit-Rep system finished target analysis. With that statement hanging in the air, he whistled a piercing note.

Beat hurtled down out of the sky like a bullet and raked his talons across the laser weapon in Prophet's forehead, leaving it a sparking scar in the Egg Denizen's face.

"Nice!" Vector exulted. "Okay! Dog-pile on the one that's still armed!"

Silver grunted as he used his psychic powers to suppress the disorientation field that Egg Denizen: Princess was putting out. "Take Knight out quickly! I'm not sure how long I can hold this!"

"Ye heard the bloke, mates!" Marine ordered. "Let's show this land-lubbin' bilge rat what-for!"

Egg Denizen: General had easily proved to be a match for two skilled blade-wielders, but Sally and Antoine had succeeded in occupying its full attention while Rotor and Bunnie took out her minions. With more leeway on that front, Bunnie had thrown Rotor at

the Egg Denizen's back where he put his favorite offensive invention to use and unleashed a few hundred decibels of sound energy straight through her armor and into her delicate inner workings.

Tails had a hard time dealing with Egg Denizen: Forge given his necessary, but self-imposed, handicap. Nevertheless; through use of the Rush Jet, a bag of grain dust from his subspace pocket to temporarily and explosively douse the flames around the robots head, and a volleyball spike of Tango's 'spin dash' mode through said vulnerable robot head; he'd prevailed.

Now to get back to his own robot allies before something happened to them.

Rock had hit on an idea, and was now putting it into action. Switching to the Chroma Camo, he goaded Rouge Woman into firing on him as he faded from view. And then promptly shouted like he'd been hit anyway.

As the roboticized master dove in for a melee strike, he side-stepped the blow unseen and allowed herself to become embedded in the relatively soft ground. Wasting no time, he switched back to his Mega Buster, charged up, and fired.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 26%

As Roll analyzed the weapons at her disposal, she recalled an old television show regarding substances that could stop bullets and got an idea. She switched to the Hydrokinesis weapon and waited for an opening.

When she heard the hail of bullets cease momentarily, she leaped from cover and fired at the roboticized master even as he finished

reloading and fired upon her. The hail of bullets met the oncoming rush of water and failed to either penetrate or even slow it down.

Roll immediately switched to her buster and charged the weapon even as she herself charged towards her opponent. As Omega Man started to stir, she fired...

... and blinked in surprise at what appeared to be a small bird next to Omega Man's weapon orb.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 24%

Getting Shadow to listen had been difficult, but Sonic had managed through mentioning that Rouge and Omega had been roboticized and were even now squaring off against Rock and Roll. Shadow had been pretty insistent on following him back after that.

'How the heck have I not yet made a music pun regarding those two?' (6) Sonic wondered idly to himself as he and Shadow raced into the spot where he'd last seen the two robots...

...and found them and Tails already talking with a restored Rouge and flicky-Omega. Wow. Sonic had forgotten that Omega could sometimes do that. It was something of a toss-up most Loops if the non-looping E-series bot was a full robot or a flicky-in-a-robot like many of the other E-series bots. But most Loops it really didn't matter. Until Rouge had programmed a little something that would allow flicky-Omega to actually exit his robot form and later re-integrate with it. Sonic knew she kept several flash drives with the program in her subspace pocket, but he'd really only personally seen Omega make use of it once or twice in the Loops. Even when a flicky, Omega preferred his robot form.

"–and that's why I've taken to carrying Omega's robot body in my subspace pocket when he's out like this," Rouge finished, producing Omega's usual robot body as she did. The bird chirped happily and

promptly flew into the open cranium, turning to an energy form as he did so.

"E-123 Omega back online," the robot monotoned as his head panel shut itself. That at least never changed. No matter the variant, Omega's voice box was incapable of conveying emotional undertones. "Ready to lay waste to the worthless consumer models of Drs. Eggman and Wily."

"I think you're going to get your chance," Roll informed them as she shifted to a red and black coloration with yellow highlights.

'Must be Omega Man's weapon,' Sonic reasoned.

"Yeah," Rock formed his arm into a cannon as he shifted to a white and black coloration with pink highlights of Rouge Woman's weapon. "We've got company."

Two more Egg Denizens tromped out of the woods nearby. One seemed to be a young female-style model, except for the flames her hands were generating, while the other looked like a fat guy made from a mass of metal vines. Sonic could swear he smelled wine in the air all of a sudden as well.

"Surrender in the name of the Eggman-Wily Empire!" the female ordered. "So say Egg Denizen: Vine and Egg Denizen: Hearth."

Sally and the rest of the Freedom Fighters had been having a rough day trying to make it to the Wily Egg. After Egg Denizen: General had fallen, they'd faced the pair known as Egg Denizen: Cup and Egg Denizen: Barbarian.

The first appeared to be some kind of young female holding up a gigantic bowl, looking for all the world like a giant wine glass with a novelty stem. She also didn't really seem to do much in the way of combat.

The latter on the other hand was incredibly strong, relentless, and seemed utterly invincible. It had taken the four mobians a bit before they realized that Egg Denizen: Cup's whole shtick was healing her ally, and that she actually didn't have any personal offensive or defensive powers of her own.

Fortunately, Egg Denizen: Barbarian wasn't exactly a tactical genius. He'd allowed the Freedom Fighters to get between him and his healing support and before he'd realized what was happening, Antoine had dealt with the healer. Without constant regeneration, the barbarian model was merely 'very tough' and had eventually fallen to their coordinated efforts.

Then there was their current opponent. Egg Denizen: Meme. An utterly passive female robot who had trapped the group and herself in some sort of demented quiz show. According to her, they had to answer all of her questions correctly. A single wrong answer, lie, or 'I don't know' and the speaker's life was forfeit. A single refusal, and all the lives of the questioned were forfeit.

It had started out with some rather easy personal questions, followed by a series of trivia questions that made Sally very thankful Rock and Roll had volunteered data on their home reality to NICOLE. Then the questions had started to get tricky.

"Who would win in a battle between Sonic and Mega Man?" volleyed Meme.

"Dr. Eggman and Dr. Wily," Sally shot back without hesitation.

Meme scowled. "Who shall you face in battle after myself?"

"Someone who eez not you, I think," Antoine sniffed disdainfully.

"Where are your friends right now?" Meme grinned evilly.

Rotor's eyes narrowed. "The four of us are here with you. The rest are somewhere else."

"Honestly, sugah-bot," Bunnie put her hand on her hip in exasperation before Meme could ask another question. "Exactly how many more questions we gotta answer before ya' let us on our way?"

Meme got an ugly look on her face. "As many as it takes."

"That answer is not exact," NICOLE interjected.

Meme's ugly look turned to one of horror as her own trap executed her for a wrong answer. (7)

Blues, Knuckles, and the Chaotix weren't exactly having an easy time of things since getting rid of Hunter and Prophet. First they'd been ambushed by some snake-woman robot named Egg Denizen: Gorgon who had eye-beams that turned their target to stone. Simply not getting hit had been one heck of a chore, especially given their mountainous route, but a rockslide caused by Mighty had buried the terrible foe at the base of the cliff.

Their current foes didn't have such a terrifying ability, but they were a force to be reckoned with regardless.

Egg Denizen: Cyclone hurtled gale force winds everywhere from the two tubes on his back, keeping the entire group grounded while Egg Denizen: Joker was throwing bombs filled with Chaos Energy without any sort of care for where they landed, disrupting the whole landscape. It was a toss-up right now what would topple first, their group or the mountain around them.

Blaze and her allies weren't having a fun time. The strange figure of Egg Denizen: Crossroad, that of three females apparently joined at the back, was disturbing, but the figure itself seemed to have no movement or offensive ability. Its *defensive* ability was proving to be somewhat more problematic however.

The fact that each of the three faces had summoned another Egg Denizen to combat the group was a fair bit worse for their situation.

Amy and Cream, along with Cheese, had their hands full with the feminine Egg Denizen: Flower, whose large petals spawned masses of smaller ones that could not only damage and inhibit the combatants, but teleported around the battlefield at random.

Silver was in a solo battle against what looked like a mechanical satyr called Egg Denizen: Wild, who generated all manner of energy-beasts to fight alongside him.

Blaze herself was partnered with Marine again against the massively unpredictable Egg Denizen: Box. The designs on the box-shaped foe depicted the story of a woman who opened a magical jar and unleashed unspeakable horrors on the world. Like the jar in the story, Egg Denizen: Box would play a jaunty 'Jack-in-the-box' tune before opening up and unleashing some manner of disastrous result. Blaze and Marine had yet to land a blow on their primary foe because they were so tied up in fending off the latest *thing* it had unleashed.

And throughout it all, Blaze could sense the immobile Crossroad feeding power to the other three and enhancing their abilities while they in turn fed the defenses keeping Crossroad protected from direct assaults.

Egg Denizen: Hearth and Egg Denizen: Vine had proven to be little issue against the combined might of both Shadow's team as well and Sonic and Mega Man's. The problem was that the alcoholic fumes Vine had saturated the battlefield with had left the organic members of Shadow's team (Sonic and Tails had gone after Hearth instead) rather tipsy even after the two groups separated.

As a result, the female assassin-robot known as Egg Denizen: Vengeance was giving the trio of Rouge, Shadow, and Omega a much harder time than it should have. Shadow and Rouge's reflexes

were off until the alcohol worked through their systems, and Omega had always had trouble with assassin-style opponents. He was built for raw force engagements, not fighting opponents who relied on stealth and precision.

"Show yourself, worthless servant of Eggman and Wily!" Omega blared at the surrounding forest as he did his best to cover his teammates.

Sonic wiped his brow of sweat after the latest encounter with yet another Denizen/Egg-something-or-other mish-mash, the ruins of the twin monstrosities 'Dawn' and 'Dusk' lying nearby. This was officially getting ridiculous. He was certain none of his other friends were having this hard of a time making their way to the Wily Egg.

"You know, with all of the enemies showing up now that didn't the first time, I wonder what else the doctors have in store for us that they didn't before," Rock mused.

"Not sure if he'd risk the Stardroids or not," Roll stated. "The Dimensions for certain. Probably the CRORQ Numbers as well. Huh... Getting a few conflicting memories on three of the latter."

Rock paused for a moment. "I see what you mean. CRORQ's Wave Man might be called Water Man, his Blade Man might be Razor Man, and his Oil Man might be Grease Man (8). Huh. Also, it seems Wily's little altered history includes some robots called the Constellation Droids, and an ally of ours named... Good circuits, does this Fan guy not have a personality?"

"I met him in one of my failed lives, and it doesn't seem like it," Roll admitted. "Creepy, right?"

"No kidding," Rock shuddered. "There are toasters out on the market with more depth of character."

"Not that this isn't fascinating," Sonic cut in, "but are any of those guys you mentioned a problem?"

"The Stardroids certainly would be," Rock allowed, "but I'm not sure if Wily could control them, even with how screwy this place is. The Constellation Droids are fairly tough, but not a whole lot more than usual. Could be twelve or fourteen of them depending if Wily thinks he can control Apollo and Luna. Dimensions aren't much tougher than the normal robot masters, same with the CRORQ numbers. Though one of the first three is called Sonic Man."

"WHAT?!" Sonic growled. "Why that... I'll *sue!* "

"Chill," Rock suppressed a chuckle. "His design is actually aquatic. The name is because he uses sound waves."

Sonic didn't seem to hear as he continued gnashing his teeth.

"Hey, guys!" Tails called from the crest of a nearby hill. "Come quick!"

The rest of the group quickly convened on him and he pointed towards a lake, or at least as close to one as this place was likely to get, at the bottom of the other side. Or rather, at the lone figure seated at the shore, clearly fishing.

"Hey, it's Big!" Sonic brightened. "Let's go say h–"

Rock cut him off with a firm hand on the hedgehog's shoulder. "Wait."

"What gives?" Sonic returned quizzically. "It's just Big. He's a cool guy."

"More like Big Man," Roll revealed gravely. "He's a roboticized master. (9)"

Sonic's eyes went wide. "Aw, yertz."

Egg Denizen: Vengeance was getting bolder. Her attacks were getting harder for Omega to effectively counter while he protected his alcohol-affected allies. Any moment now and she would decide to move in for the kill.

"Damnit," Shadow groaned. He'd been just a hair too slow in dodging one of their opponent's strikes and had a ringing in his head to go with the alcohol-induced disorientation. Rouge was out cold after taking a hit herself. He needed to give Omega an edge. Willing the pain down, he put his hand to the robot's frame and channeled as much Chaos Force as he could muster. "Chaos... Control..."

Time in the area around them slowed to a crawl as Shadow used the warping technique. Omega quickly spotted their stealthy opponent making a dash from her cover towards them in what could have been a decisive strike had Shadow not acted.

"Exterminate," Omega intoned as he unleashed a barrage of weapons fire that proved Egg Denizen: Vengeance wasn't a particularly heavily armored model.

With all the trouble they were having, Blaze decided it might be best to switch opponents. She'd turned her fire powers on Egg Denizen: Flower to great effect and directed the rest to act similarly.

Silver had used his psychic powers to forcibly hold Egg Denizen: Box's lid shut, which caused it to explode from forces it couldn't contain. This left Amy, Cream, Cheese, and Marine to handle Egg Denizen: Wild and his energy beasts while Blaze and Silver caught their breaths from exertion. Once the satyr-form robot fell, Egg Denizen: Crossroad would be a sitting duck.

The Chaotix, plus Knuckles and Blues, had gotten lucky. That's all there was to it. Vector had gotten fed up with the suppressing wind and continuous bombardment, no matter how poorly the latter was aimed, and pulled out a baseball bat from his subspace pocket. As

one of the chaos-energy bombs came in, on target for once, he'd swung with all his might and somehow hit the thing through the gale winds towards Egg Denizen: Cyclone where it detonated beautifully, blowing the wind-based robot to pieces. (10)

With freedom of movement restored Charmy, Ray, Knuckles, and Beat took to the skies while the rest scattered outwards from where they'd been pinned down. It was time to press a counter-offensive against Egg Denizen: Joker.

"What are those things, Sally girl?" Bunnie asked from where the Freedom Fighters were holed up at the base of a mountain. Above that mountain floated their objective, the Wily Egg. In their way stood what looked like two more Egg Denizens.

One was female and had spear-length spines sticking out of her back. The other was probably male and looked like it belonged in a monster movie stomping through downtown and basically trashing everything in its path. Both were, in a word, huge.

"I don't know," Sally responded. "NICOLE, what's the assessment on our potential hostiles?"

"They are Egg Denizen: Mother and Egg Denizen: Father."

The Freedom Fighters blinked as one. That hadn't been NICOLE's voice...

Sonic and the rest had carefully made their way down to where Big Man was fishing – there was no sign of Big's pet Froggy, robot or otherwise – but they needn't have bothered. The sumo-sized robot master didn't even look up as they approached. He just kept fishing.

"So... Now what?" Sonic scratched his head. They had Big Man dead to rights, but taking him out like this just... didn't seem proper.

"Let's try talking with him," Rock suggested, keeping his arm cannon ready just in case as he approached the roboticized master and addressed him. "Big Man, I presume? I'm Rock Light, also known as Mega Man. I'd prefer not to fight you if possible, so if you'll cooperate we can restore you to your biological state without any sort of unpleasantness. I promise that you'll be treated peacefully and respectfully."

"Okay," Big Man replied without looking up.

'That worked?!' Sonic stared incredulously. He wasn't the only one either.

"After fishing," Big Man finished.

As Sonic proceeded to facefault into the ground (11), any doubts that this was really Big were reduced to smithereens.

"Okay..." Rock agreed, looking a bit confused. He'd offered the peaceful option to numerous robot masters, but having one *take* it was throwing him off. "Why are you fishing?"

"Dr. Eggman and Dr. Wily told unit Big Man to do what he does best," the roboticized master responded. "So unit Big Man fishes. Unit Big Man must catch a big one."

"So..." Tails offered, looking as confused as everyone else.

"...I guess we wait for him to catch a fish?" Roll suggested.

"I am Egg Denizen: Consort," the female robot informed the gathered Freedom Fighters. She was expertly crafted with the appearance of a noble woman in her best finery. A robotic 'trophy wife'. "I am not here to fight you, merely to inform you that I am the one who maintains the barrier around the mountain you see ahead. The barrier that keeps the abode of the masters Eggman and Wily inviolate."

Rotor unleashed a shockwave of sound that washed over Consort and dissipated without so much as an indication that it had even connected.

"As my barrier is inviolate, so am I," Consort continued, uncaring of the power just levied against her. "I can neither be attacked nor myself attack others. Only a symbol of eternal love can pierce my protections (12), so you had best abandon your folly here and now. Even were you to slay me, Mother and Father are too strong for you and yours. Go home and prepare yourselves to welcome your new masters."

"Hey, Sonic?" Roll asked as something occurred to her. "How big a fish could Big Man catch anyway?"

Crossroad had barely gone down when a wave of water swept over the battlefield. Marine managed to shield herself, Cream, Cheese, and Amy with her hydrokinesis abilities; but Blaze and Silver had been swept up and knocked unconscious against the treeline.

"Avast ye lubbers!" called the voice of their opponent, a robotic humanoid crustacean in pirate garb, holding a long trident in his single hand, the other arm ending in a bladed crab claw. "Surrender yeselves to the glorious admirals Eggman and Wily!"

"Or what ye Davy Jones wannabe?!" Marine yelled back. "You surrender ta me and maybe I won't keelhaul ya fer what ye did ta me mates!"

"Watch yer tongue, wench!" the pirate-bot snapped back, brandishing the trident at the still-conscious trio. "I be Egg Denizen: Tide, and I'll run ye all through before I'll allow such talk!"

Sonic thought to all the battles Big had put his fishing rod through. All the stress he put on a seemingly flimsy object that never even

creaked in protest, much less broke. He thought to how Big was able to lift things that he'd only ever seen his old friend Mighty pick up before. He thought about how Big could stop the spinning sawblade over twice his size that was Silver Sonic using his bare (well, gloved) hands and without even being pushed back by the impact. And then tossing the giant robot several dozen feet in the air with minimal effort.

In the end, Espio had taken down Joker. The Chaotix ninja had camouflaged himself, swiped one of the chaos-energy bomb's right out of the Egg Denizen's hand, and pinned it to Joker's back. Events had proceeded rather predictably from there.

Blues, Knuckles, and the Chaotix had trudged out of the mountain area at long last and on towards the Wily Egg, only to be confronted by yet another of the Egg Denizens about halfway there. This one looked like a buff, bearded man wielding a sort of zig-zagged javelin. His lower body was either hidden by the lightning-spitting could he rode, or the cloud itself was the robot's lower body. It was hard to tell.

"Tremble ye mortals at the power of the chief servant of Eggman and Wily!" the figure boomed with a voice like thunder. "For I am Egg Denizen: Storm and none shall not pass!"

"Very," Sonic replied, getting a sinking feeling in his gut as Big Man's fishing rod began to jerk and bend as the roboticized master got a bite.

Shadow and Rouge had finally recovered enough from their mild involuntary intoxication to proceed without issue. Leaving the scattered remains of Vengeance behind, the three sometimes known as Team Dark made their way out of the twisted forest and towards the Wily Egg.

Only to meet a terrifying robot standing in their path.

The fact that the three were terrified immediately told them something was up. They'd seen too much, fought too many deadly foes, to feel this kind of fear permeating their bones. There was no explanation except that it was being induced artificially.

"Malevolent empathic aura detected," Omega droned, only the shaking of his armor indicating that he felt the effects as well.

"You are every bit as good as your files say," the voice of the robot replied as it turned towards them. Shadows clung to the robot like a cloak, obscuring its precise form from view save for a single arm that held a two-pronged pitchfork with a wickedly curved scythe blade at one end. Red eyes glowed sinisterly from beneath a pitch black helm that looked as if it belonged only on the most evil of undead warlords.

"We are better than anything you've heard," Shadow shot back with confidence he barely held onto. "We will be victorious."

"No," the figure rebutted as its second arm came out to grasp its weapon, a glowing orb at the center of the robot's torso that pulsed like a living heart was revealed by the movement. "You will be dead. So says Egg Denizen: Reaper."

Rock, Roll, and their allies watched as Big Man reeled in his catch... and the water of the 'lake' crest upwards as something *huge* was pulled out of it.

The robotic fish/squid-thing that broke the surface towered over the figures below it, and both Sonic and Tails reacted without thought and attacked it. Rock and Roll followed their lead and fired on the leviathan, causing it to roar as if in pain and fall back into the lake. Damaged, but nowhere near enough to defeat it.

"Reevaluating orders," Big Man intoned as he stared at the downed robot that could only be an Egg Denizen. "Unit Big Man was ordered

to do what unit Big Man does best. What unit Big Man does best is fish."

Roll wasn't sure she liked where this was going and began charging up her Mega Buster.

"What unit Big Man also does best is protect 'friends'. Unit Big Man serves Dr. Eggman and Dr. Wily."

"Aww... *no* ," Rock heard Sonic whisper off to the side where he and Tails had landed.

"Egg Denizen: Kraken also serves Dr. Eggman and Dr. Wily," Big man began to turn around to face the group of heroes. "Conclusion. Egg Denizen: Kraken is unit Big Man's 'friend'."

Roll fired her charged Spin Dash Blast to restore Big Man before things progressed any farther. But even with a direct hit, he didn't revert to normal. He just sparked a bit from the stunning properties, and didn't even slow down as he faced the opposing group, the form of Egg Denizen: Kraken rising up behind him. (13)

"You shall not hurt unit Big Man's friend!"

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 22%

"It's confirmed," Hephaestus grumbled. "I just finished running the analysis. All of the higher success paths that keep getting bypassed involved losses on the part of Sonic and his friends or outright capture of Rock and his siblings as well as Sonic. These paths would have led to overconfident doctors ripe for a last-minute reversal of fortune. But the continued victories and successes are pitting them against much more dangerous foes and driving the doctors towards as-yet undetermined desperation tactics which have a much higher chance of resulting in the failure of this attempt."

"And it would be wrong to tweak things towards such a scenario now," Hermes sighed. "They'd never forgive us. Even if they knew it was hurting their overall chances, they wouldn't have it any other way. For all Sonic and his pals are willing to do the 'heroic sacrifice' bit, letting others, especially friends, die to increase their chances of success kind of goes against their grain."

"Goes against *their* grain?" Hephaestus raised an eyebrow. "The Light family and 'acceptable losses' haven't been on speaking terms for *generations* ."

Rock and Roll high-fived each other to pass on the weapons they'd collected and agreed to double team Big Man while Sonic and Tails took Rush and Tango to deal with Kraken. At least, that's how it was *supposed* to work. Big Man, it seemed, had other ideas.

Shrugging off a double barrage of the Omega Gatling, Big Man cast his fishing rod at Tails, entangled the flying fox, and swung him straight into the ground.

The Freedom Fighters were getting nowhere against Consort. Everything they threw at her simply... slid off. The only thing that was saving them right now was that she didn't attack back. She just stood there and let them waste their energy against her.

But NICOLE had confirmed the existence of a barrier around the mountain that was their goal. A barrier maintained by Consort. So they *had* to figure out some way of rendering her inoperable.

If they didn't, then there was no hope for any of them.

Rock and Roll attempted the Black Wave next, but the stunning weapon didn't even make Big Man pause as he repeated his fishing attack on Sonic. Both of the siblings motioned for their animal

companions to back off from the battle and support from outside the range of Kraken's thrashing tentacles and Big Man's Fishing Rod.

The two siblings nodded to each other. They needed to run through their weapon options a little faster to find something that worked against the sumo-sized Big Man.

Shadow sneered at Reaper and tried to suppress the shivering the robot's unnatural aura produced in him. Ha and Rouge had barely dodged a swipe by the Egg Denizen's scythe as Omega fell back and opened fire.

"Your pitiful metal balls cannot harm me," Reaper taunted as his shadowy cloak absorbed Omega's bullets. "They are of the dark earth and fall within my domain. As shall your bodies when your fleeting lives have left them. Submit and spare yourselves unnecessary pain."

"You don't know us too well, do you?" Rouge taunted back with confidence Shadow could clearly see she didn't feel. It didn't matter, the minor distraction gave him a moment to access his subspace pocket and pull out a few weapons of a... different sort.

Shadow only rarely encountered the alien race known as the Black Arms who claimed he was secretly an agent of theirs in the Loops. They hadn't shown up this Loop to gather weapons from, but they had in the last one after Hermes dropped by to ask if they'd help this place start looping. By Shadow's count, it had been the 326th time he'd encountered them. Every time different, and to date no clear resolution to the questions they raised about his pre-Loop origins.

But trying to discover what the secret behind the Black Arms was last Loop had taken a back seat to Shadow plundering every member of the hostile alien race he ran across for their unique energy weapons and shoving them in his subspace pocket (14). And now he brought them out.

Time to see how Egg Denizen: Reaper handled lasers instead of bullets.

Roll's use of the Rapid Stinger and Rock's attempt with the Omochao weapon simply bounced off of Big Man's armor. He ignored the hits as he sent Sonic in full Spin Dash mode rocketing back with a palm strike.

(This section by masterofgames)

Water and other attacks flew fast and furious across the battlefield between Egg Denizen: Tide and his three female (and one chao) opponents. The piratical insults between the robot and Marine flew even faster. Tide had fired off a few good ones, but Marine finally decided to stop holding back. "That be it! No more miss nice gal! Remember me name in the scrap heap ya' fact'ry reject! I be Marine, and I be a Mighty Pirate™!"

Tide simply laughed. "Har! Try say'n that again when ye be taller than a trout, ya shrimp!"

Marine simply grinned, thinking back to a loop long ago. "Size is nay important! A fight is more than just wavin' about yer weapon. It actually be a lot like a romant'c date. It be not so much what ye do, as what ye say!"

Tide simply scowled. "Tha' be making no sense! Shut ye yap and fight! I swear, ye fight like a dairy farmer!"

Marine's eyes twinkled. She was in the zone. "How appropriate, ye fight like a cow!" she quipped.

Tide paused, blinking as he thought over the insult thrown back in his face. Which gave Marine an easy shot to kick him in the face.

"Ha! Ye see? Sharp tongue beats sharp steel!" she whooped as Tide recoiled.

"Ye'll pay for that dearly! Me attacks have left entire islands depopulated!"

"With yer breath, I bet they all suffocated!" Marine smirked, her cutting barb leaving him open for a cheap shot once more.

"Aargh! Stop that! I be able to out-wrestle octopi!"

"Aye, and I be sure spineless creatures everywhere be tremblin' at yer might!"

"Yarr! Soon ye be wearing me trident like a shish-kabob!"

"Not if ye keep wavin' it 'round like a feather duster!"

"Bah! Ye be outmatched! Just earlier t'day, twelve men I've beaten!"

"By the size of yer gut, I be guessing they be eaten!"

"Ye got a real attitude problem, ye know that?"

"Well ye have a real hair problem!"

"Ye just don't know when to stop, do ye?"

"Nay, An neither did yer barber I think!"

"Grr... Look over there!"

"Aye, aye, I know, it be a three headed monkey..."

"Oh... ye heard that one before, eh?"

"EVERYONE be hearing that one before! Step up yer game!"

Roll fired the Acoustic Blaster at full charge while Rock unleashed the Shockwave Boomer. Big Man didn't even seem to notice he'd been hit as he snagged Tails in his fishing line and swung him around into an already dazed Sonic.

Actually hitting Egg Denizen: Storm was going to be a problem. He was deadly accurate with the lightning bolts he flung out and even Beat hadn't been small or fast enough to evade them in time to inflict damage on their floating opponent. And it seemed he could deflect Blues's buster shots as well as return fire at the same time.

The group had scattered, taking advantage of the fact that they now had a wide open space to keep from being corralled as with their previous opponents. But even splitting themselves as targets and dividing Storm's attention was only giving them momentary reprieves.

They needed to come up with something fast.

Roll swore as the Psycho Burst failed to have any appreciable effect on Big Man, and signaled for her brother to use Hydrokinesis to cover for Sonic and Tails while they tried to keep Egg Denizen: Kraken busy. The torrent of water seemed to hamper Big Man's movements a bit, but it just wasn't dealing more than superficial damage.

The siblings cursed and switched weapons again.

Bunnie was starting to crack. None of them could figure out how to get past Consort's defenses enough to even scratch her, much less take her out of commission. They were going to fail. Even if everyone else succeeded, they would all fail unless the Freedom Fighters could defeat this foe.

She put her head in her hands to hide the tears she felt coming, and spotted a particular something on her finger. Her wedding ring.

Only a symbol of eternal love can pierce my protections. (15)

Rock swore internally as the Trick Sword barely nicked Big Man's armor. He'd picked an ineffective close range weapon against a powerful opponent. This was going to *hurt* .

"CHAOS CANNON!" came Roll's cry as Big Man wound up for a retaliatory strike. The shot was dead on for the roboticized master's arm, which made it incredibly surprising when that arm didn't even slow down as it passed through the temporal distortion projectile and clotheslined Rock, sending him flying across the battlefield.

Rock rubbed his neck as he switched to the Stealth Mine while his sister chose the Tail Wind. As Big Man again tore Sonic and Tails away from assaulting his giant aquatic partner, they hoped that maybe these weapons would fare better.

Shade knew she was in deep trouble. She'd left on her own to scout the way to the Wily Egg given that she could move faster solo than with a group, but getting to the destination quickly had been the only thing to go right for her.

She'd been in the middle of cracking the password for the doctors' teleporter when the barrier around the surrounding mountain had gone up (16). Trying to contact anyone outside had only gotten her the gloating laughter of the two mad doctors joyfully informing her that their two most powerful Egg Denizens, Mother and Father, were inside the barrier with her. And actively looking for her.

So far, she'd managed to stay ahead of the two robotic behemoths and not engage them. Her comparatively little Loop experience hadn't allowed her to gain anywhere near the power or tools to take

out even *one* of those monstrosities on her own, much less both at once.

The problem was that she was running out of places to hide on the mountain while they stomped around in search of her. She needed to call the cavalry in, and soon.

Rock and Roll switched out their weapons again. Tail Wind hadn't even made Big Man budge, and getting him to step on a Stealth Mine hadn't fared any better.

Rock opened fire with the Rabbot Laser as Roll unleashed the Fire Tornado. When the flames died down, Big Man was only a little singed around the edges.

Big Man ignored the two in order to try and again interfere with Sonic and Tails' attack on his robotic leviathan companion. Rush and Tango had long since given up supportive fire after nearly hitting one of their other-dimensional allies amidst the chaotic melee.

Bunnie hadn't been a looper long enough to get the kind of goodies the more experienced of her friends and allies had access to, but Tails and Sonic were perfectly willing to share some of what they'd come across. Earlier this Loop, Tails had installed a setting for something called a rail gun on her cybernetic arm, but with some of his own personal improvements so it didn't do things like produce heat in quantities that would fry both her flesh and metal bits alike. Bunnie didn't understand all the terms he'd used, though she thought she'd heard 'technomagical' in there somewhere, but the thing worked.

Hoo boy, did it ever work.

And the best part? Whatever Tails had done with his improvements meant it could fire anything metallic and conductive. Like her wedding ring.

Even knowing what she needed to do, regardless of any lack of guarantee it would work, the act of removing the ring for this purpose was still painful. Bunnie fought back tears as she loaded it into the weapon and began charging the magnetic accelerators.

"Ah'm sorry sugah 'Twan," she whispered as she took aim. "Ah hope ya can forgive me luv."

The recoil from firing nearly knocked Bunnie off her mechanical feet, but she remained standing long enough to see the shot rip through Consort's barrier and her torso both.

And to see that the Egg Denizen still stood in spite of it. Her barrier once again inviolate.

'No...' Bunnie thought in despair as a tear escaped her eye.

Roll came in from one side with the Sharp Knuckle while Rock came from the other with the Mighty Blow. Big Man simply held out his hands and caught both of the robots' fists, and turned the action into a grab before either could disengage.

Heaving his arms upwards, Big Man flung both of the robots into the air where Kraken then slammed both back into the ground many yards away with its tentacles.

"We can't take much more of this," Rock groaned as the pair got to their feet.

"Then I guess it's a good thing I snagged a few of these before we left your place," the voice of Sonic came from right next to them. Turning, the robotic siblings saw their hedgehog ally holding out a pair of E-Tanks.

"It's a *very* good thing," Roll agreed as she grabbed the one for her and eagerly guzzled its contents.

Reaper had been good, very good, at deflecting the energy weapons with his scythe and retaliating in kind. The robot could probably have given General Grievous a run for his money despite having fewer limbs.

But once Omega had gotten a hold on the polearm and grappled the Egg Denizen for it, it was all over. Unable to dodge and unwilling to release his weapon to fix that, Reaper had been shot full of so many holes that even his apparently rapid self-repair systems couldn't keep up. In short order, all that was left was the pulsing core which Shadow collected.

"Starting a trophy collection are we?" Rouge teased the dark hedgehog.

"Thought it would go with my curtains," Shadow smirked. (17)

Rock went at Big Man's back with the Electric Blades, and barely managed a scratch. Roll's attempt at hitting the roboticized master over the head with the Piko Hammer met with similarly disappointing results.

The only saving grace was that Sonic and Tails both managed to cover their retreat despite interference from Kraken so they didn't suffer another of Big Man's retaliation strikes.

Tide had indeed stepped up his game, and had dropped all pretense of trash talk to focus solely on battle. He was proving not only able to match Marine's water abilities blow-for-blow, he was also able to fend off Amy's Piko Hammer with his trident and keep Cream at bay with his bladed claw. Which left Cheese free to take free shots at the robot's face. They weren't doing any real damage, but it was clear that the Egg Denizen was getting very annoyed with the chao.

"Enough!" the robot bellowed, and spun around in a way that forced his two melee opponents to back off, and allowed him to backclaw

the plucky chao into a nearby rock.

"CHEESE!" Cream gasped, and turned an angry face towards the pirate-bot. "You..."

"What of it, wench?" Tide spat. "Yer little beastie got what was comin' to 'im and no less."

Cream's body twitched, her fur puffing out messily and her whole posture changing to a much more wild one. She then turned her now feral gaze on the Egg Denizen and screamed her displeasure. "YOU MEANIE!"

Egg Denizen: Tide reflexively backed away from the sudden alteration in his opponent as the feral Cream leaped at him with wild red eyes, bared claws, and big sharp pointy teeth. (18)

"Strewth!" Marine stared in shock.

"S-s-s-s-shiver me timbers-s-s-s-s!" Proclaimed the severed head of Egg Denizen: Tide before it went offline.

Rock landed from using Ray Glide to dodge an immense assault by Kraken, and Roll similarly decloaked from the Chroma Camo beside him. The two weapons were great at helping them avoid attacks, but they simply didn't have the kind of offensive ability they needed right now.

Big Man was taking damage, sure, but nowhere near enough to where he'd be vulnerable to a use of the Spin Dash Blast. Or at least not a *single* use...

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" the two siblings asked each other at the same time.

As the Chaotix attempted to discuss options for retaliating against the airborne elemental artillery platform that was Egg Denizen: Storm, Charmy was trying to recall that Loop where he'd been a secret agent. He'd handled this kind of situation all the time then.

"Better put the suit on so I can get the right mindset," Charmy said to himself as he pulled on a tuxedo from his subspace pocket. "Riiigghht. That's how I did things that Loop."

Turning sharply, Charmy zipped up towards his hovering opponent in a wild zig-zag that proved impossible for the robot to lock onto. As he got close, Charmy began to zip around Storm in search of a weak spot.

"Who art thou to challenge me like this?!" Storm demanded.

"Bee," Charmy told him suavely as he continued zipping around his opponent. Just a little longer... "Charmy Bee. Agent 007 of Angel Island Secret Service." (19)

"And you would dare defy the will of the Destined Masters of All Creation?!" Storm boomed, causing the Chaotix member to stop in front of him and turn a puzzled look his way.

"What did you expect us to do?" the formally attired bee questioned. "Surrender?"

"Yes."

Charmy shook his head. "No, no, no. You're supposed to say 'No, Mr. Bee. I expect you to di–'AGH!"

Charmy was cut off as a lighting bolt finally struck him and he began falling to the ground below, trailing smoke.

"Fool!" boomed the robot. "I am Egg Denizen: Storm! I AM INVINCIBLE!"

"Heh," Charmy chuffed as he fell and pointed a finger gun at the weather-bot. "Bang."

Multiple explosions lit up the airborne robot an instant later from the devices Charmy had pulled from his subspace pocket and planted as he'd flown around the robot.

"Okay," Tails said from where the four had momentarily fallen back to hash out their strategy. Fortunately Kraken didn't seem too inclined to leave the water and Big Man seemed even less inclined to leave Kraken's side. "What's the plan?"

"Big Man's resistant to the Sonic Shot," Rock informed the mobian duo, only for Sonic to interrupt him.

"Admitting that 'Spin Dash Blast' doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, just like last time, eh?" Sonic teased.

"Something like that," the blue bomber rolled his eyes.

"Anyway," his sister picked up for him, "we came up with the idea to hit him with both of ours at once, but we'd like to hedge our bets."

"You want us to team up for a quadruple-whammy, right?" Sonic grinned. "Me with blue boy and Tails with miss golden gladiator?"

"Yep," Rock nodded.

"Well let's do it to it!" Tails cheered and led the charge back into battle.

"Hey!" Sonic playfully called after his friend as the Light siblings followed behind, charging their Mega Busters. "Stop stealing my lines!"

Dodging around the strikes of Egg Denizen: Kraken, Rock and Roll reached full charge as both Sonic and Tails revved up their

respective Spin Dashes. As one, all four attacked and struck Big Man from both sides simultaneously, causing a cloud of smoke to envelope the roboticized master.

'Ah failed...'

No other thought would penetrate the haze of despair that was Bunnie's mind right now. Her friends shaking her and calling to her elicited no response. It wasn't until Antoine got the idea to kiss her, the kind of kiss they usually reserved for when they were alone no less, that she snapped out of it.

"SUGAH 'TWAN!" She sputtered indignantly as she shoved her husband off of her. "THIS AIN'T THA TIME!"

"Ma chérie," Antoine told her tenderly. "You were not respondink to anythink else, so I figured I would try somethink a little more... persuasive."

"But... Ah failed," Bunnie began to cry as what had happened came crashing back onto her. "Ah'm sorry 'Twan... Ah shot her with mah *wedding ring* ta give us a chance and it weren't *enough...* "

"Ma femme," Antoine cupped her cheek.

"Don't ya get it luv?!" Bunnie wept. "Ah took tha ring ya gave me when we got *married* and Ah *wasted* it. FER NOTHIN'!"

"Not for nothink," he told her gently. "Ze Egg Denizen, she eez immobile. She cannot flee. She eez, how you say, ze sittink duck. Ze shot waz not wasted."

"But," the cyber-rabbit sniffed. "Ah don't *got* another ring ta shoot her with."

"Mon ange," Antoine kissed her tears tenderly. "Ma petite. Mon lapin vaillant. How silly you can be at times."

"Huh?" she stared at her husband blankly.

Antoine smirked and held up a golden band of his own. "Did you forget zat weddink rings generahlly come in pairs?"

Bunnie stared at her lover as what he'd said sunk in. "But..."

"Mon cher cœur," he halted her protest. "Zese rings are a symbol of ze vows we said for each other, assurément. But zat eez all zey are. We are Freedom Fightairs. The peace and well-beink of others haz always come before such baubles and always will. We have known zis all our lives, each of zem. Zeir absence does not and cannot diminish ze love between us. And besides, we are loopers now, corriger? We shall have many more lifetimes to be married again, in as many ways, with as many vows, and as many rings as we wish. All zat truly matters eez our love, and zat eez somethink zis scélérat cannot make us surrender."

Bunnie couldn't help throwing herself at her husband and kissing him. Antoine could be such the romantic when he wanted to be. A discreet cough from Sally reminded them what the current situation was, and they parted with a wordless promise to pick back up where they'd left off later.

"And mon amour?" he whispered to her as he loaded his symbol of their vows into her weapon. "Zis time... aim for ze head. For clearly zis Consort, she haz no heart."

A robotic tentacle lashed out at the heroes who had stopped to catch their breath, only for a furry arm to grab it.

"Those are my friends," a voice familiar to both Sonic and Tails admonished the creature. (20)

The smoke cleared to show a hale and hearty Big the Cat firmly grasping the tentacle of Egg Denizen: Kraken. When the robot tried to continue attacking the quartet, Big's eyes narrowed.

"You're trying to hurt my friends," the sumo-sized cat turned and grasped the tentacle he held in both hands. "It's not nice–"

He flexed his muscles. "–to hurt–"

He pulled, and the massive robot was lifted out of the water and over his head. "–my–"

And slammed straight into the shore on Big's other side with a mighty crash. **"–friends!"**

Bunnie calmly eyed Consort as she lined up her shot. Consort wasn't completely immobile, but Bunnie's first shot had clearly severed something that allowed for control of her limbs. There was no possible way she could dodge this.

"You cannot win," the robot stated defiantly.

"That's what they all say, sugah," Bunnie retorted as she finished aiming, and fired.

Consort's head practically exploded as the golden band ripped through it at ridiculous speeds and continued off into the Zone, never to be seen again.

"A superb shot, ma belle guerrière," Antoine observed.

"Urgent transmission detected," NICOLE suddenly cut in. In an instant, each of the Freedom Fighters were all business.

"Play it, NICOLE," Sally requested.

NICOLE switched to the transmission, and the voice of Shade the Echidna came forth. "–assistance needed! Repeat: This is Shade. I'm trapped on the mountain beneath the Wily Egg by two immense robots named Egg Denizen: Mother and Egg Denizen: Father.

Cannot engage on own. All avenues of retreat cut off. Immediate assistance needed! Repeat: This is Shade–"

"NICOLE, relay that message and our position to the others. Tell them we're engaging the hostiles," Sally ordered even as the team of four began moving. Knowledge of Shade's position wasn't really needed right now. All anyone had to do to find her was head for the two fifty-something foot robots.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 20%

Sonic and the rest of his companions were heading for the mountain under the Wily Egg as fast as possible. Right after they'd gotten Big Man's weapon, Rock and Roll had gotten a transmission that the Freedom Fighters were moving to rescue Shade from a pair of robots even bigger than Kraken had been, and were requesting immediate reinforcements. Rush and Tango had transformed into their jet modes in order to keep up with Sonic and Tails as they zipped across the landscape.

"Whoooaaaaa...!"

And Big... Rock had made an Item-2 ride for him to use. Apparently the kid kept the thing in his database just in case despite the fact that with Rush he didn't ever need it. Big wasn't exactly handling the thing like a pro on Extreme Gear, but the Item-2 jet was a fair bit more stable, making it perfect for the generally ground-bound fisher. And Rock could guide the thing remotely on top of that to keep Big from veering off into the wilds of the bizarre Skaia-fused Skull Egg Zone.

Sonic estimated that they'd be at the base of the mountain in a few minutes, and prayed they weren't already too late.

Team Dark was making much worse time than Sonic and friends. For whatever reason, they kept getting accosted by robots, many of which looked like they shouldn't even be functional.

"I did not sign up to fight zombie robots!" Rouge complained as she kicked another... something to pieces.

Silver and Blaze still had some ringing in their heads, but they were conscious. And able to fly their custom Extreme Gear; along with Amy, Marine, and Cream; towards the coordinates Sally had sent them.

Aside from that, everything seemed smooth sailing until then.

Being the next-closest team to the mountain, Blues, Knuckles, and the Chaotix were already there, mixing it up with the towering robots. But even though they could easily reach these opponents, it's rather hard to fight something that can flatten you simply by taking a step in the right place.

"I've got Shade!"

"Excellent! Fall back and regroup!"

"Where?! With the weapons these things have, the safest place is right beneath them!"

"We gotta do something! We're just not doing enough damage right now!"

"I'm open to suggestions!"

"As of right now, all of the Egg Denizens have fallen except for Mother and Father," Orbot informed the two doctors. "And if you

don't mind me saying so, it looks like only a matter of time before they fall as well."

"Hmph!" Bass scoffed. "That's what you get for sending those weak roboticized masters instead of me. I'd have finished off both Mega Man and Mega Wo–"

I think I'm...

–man as well as Sonic and his allies by now." (21)

"Blast it all!" Eggman fumed, ignoring Wily's 'son', before turning to his friend. "They're almost at our doorstep, Albert! What exactly were you working on while I was converting those 'Denizens' to our cause? Because I don't see it stopping them! "

"Calm yourself, Ivo," Wily sipped some coffee from his skull mug as he typed. "We've got our best traps and minions to waylay them saturating the Wily Egg should they get inside, not to mention our various lines of defense. And even if they get past all that, I've spent my time getting *this* ready."

Eggman stared at the schematics of what Wily had brought up on screen.

"Oh-ho!" he exclaimed in glee. "Albert, that is *brilliant!* Positively *genius!* I'm sorry I doubted you!"

"Just a little contingency plan I cooked up," Wily smirked at his friend. *'Along with a few other little surprises,'* he added to himself. Assuming all went well, Ivo would never need to know about those. "I couldn't have done it without your original notes about that positively *inspiring* invention of yours though!"

Even the addition of Blaze's group to the melee didn't seem to be turning the tide. The armor of Mother and Father was too thick for

anyone's standard offense and their combined weapons fire was handily preventing anything stronger from being deployed.

"What's the biggest explosive you have that won't necessarily blow us to smithereens along with them?" Blues asked Shade. He'd determined that prepping a bomb would likely be their best bet at dealing significant damage to one of the two, and Shade seemed to be the explosives expert among her allies.

"It could probably level a small building," Shade responded as the two dodged beneath their massive opponents, "but I'm not sure it's enough to get through their main armor."

"Not from outside at least," Blues agreed. "Which brings me to the next question: How good are you at holding on to a moving vehicle?"

"Pretty good," Shade puzzled. "Why?"

In response, Blues whistled sharply, causing his robot avian companion to dive down towards them both. "Beat! Plane!" (22)

At the order, the bird glowed and seemed to... expand. To an ovular one-seat aviation device that looked a lot like the bird's normal form. Blues jumped in and Shade, for lack of any better ideas, jumped atop the back behind his head and held on tight.

"Keep them distracted!" Blues called to the rest of the fighters as he climbed hard and fast, Shade hanging on for dear life as she prepped her explosive.

Banking around, he dove for Egg Denizen: Father and took careful aim before firing the Beat Plane's main weapon. The plasma fire rained down on the Godzilla-wannabe robot's head and a few hit the behemoth's eye. The kaiju knock-off roared in pain as the Beat Plane flew in front of its face.

"Now!" Blues ordered, and Shade threw her bomb for all it was worth down the gullet of the beast, just as a glow of charging energy began

in the back of the throat.

The explosion went off, Father staggering as smoke poured out of its mouth. Then another explosion sounded as the energy weapon it had been priming misfired as a result and began a chain reaction that left little more than a smoking ruin to topple mightily to the ground.

"Thank you for your assistance," Dr. Lalinde told Dr. Cossack as the latter helped her prepare.

"Think nothing of it," the Russian scientist waved off the thanks. They both knew that Dr. Light and his family were quite capable, but the current situation was unlike anything else in their experience. Thus they were determined to send some form of backup to aid their friend and colleague.

As if summoned by that very thought, a blue glow appeared none too subtly in the lab, resolving itself into the alien robot known as Duo. Given the robot's last known location and the speed he traveled at (at least in-system), Dr. Light must have sent a message to the robot before he'd been captured.

"I have been alerted that there is trouble on Earth!" Duo declared with all the drama he seemed predisposed towards. "And I sense Evil at work. Where shall Justice be served?"

Rock had wondered if Big Man's weapon, the Fishing Rod, would prove useful, but he and Roll had collected it anyway. They'd been in too many situations where a seemingly useless weapon turned out to be invaluable to disregard any master weapon, no matter how ridiculous. Though, as they approached the mountainside melee with Mother, he admitted that if the Fishing Rod had a use, it wasn't going to be here.

Without Father to cover her, Mother was slowly being overwhelmed by the combatants already present. But some more firepower would surely make the fight go even faster.

He and Roll came in Mega Busters blazing, Sonic and Tails Spin Dashing straight into Mother's unguarded torso, followed by Big in a similar move. Everyone already there seemed to be avoiding the razor spines on her back, and the newcomers hardly blamed them. Each one of things looked like they could bisect any of the other Egg Denizens save Father in a single swipe. Avoiding them was just common sense. And with all of the combatants ganging up on her and frustrating her attempts at counter-attack, it was only a matter of time before she went down.

"Are you all ready?" Bass glared at the gathered defenders of the Wily Egg alongside his 'partner' Metal Sonic. He was a little unsure about some of them, but orders were orders. "Good, because the enemies of the doctors have arrived. Your orders are to keep them from getting to our masters by any means necessary."

'Why do the two of us *have to be the last line of defense?'* he grumbled to himself.

"Look who finally got here," Shadow taunted his collected allies as they reached the top of the mountain. He idly spun the still-pulsing core of Reaper on his finger while waiting on them. He and his team had been held up by the zombie robots for a while, but they'd eventually decided to stop trying to stem the tide and just get to the destination as fast as possible. The things hadn't been able to follow them.

"Eh," Sonic shrugged, "you know how it is. You're cruising right along and then the doctors drop something nasty in your path. How'd you all get here?"

"We came up the mountain by a different route," Rouge admitted. "Let us scout the area while we waited on you all to finish up."

"Well, thanks for waiting on us," Roll offered politely.

"Multiple incoming hostiles detected," Omega interrupted, looking straight at the Wily Egg.

"Oh, look," Sonic smirked as he saw a stream of figures emerge from the Wily Egg. "Here comes the welcoming committee."

"Even knowing this was coming..." Rock readied his buster nervously, his siblings doing the same.

"Too late for cold feet now," Sonic stood there casually. "Besides, it's like I told you last time we did this dance, we've spent our whole lives, several of them, trashing evil robots, overcoming impossible odds, and fighting the good fight."

Descending upon the gathered heroes was the robot master army being fielded by Dr. Eggman and Dr. Wily. Some flew under their own power, while others rode levitating platforms down. Almost everyone Rock and Roll had ever fought was there: Dr Wily's first set of original robot masters, Metal Man, Air Man, Bubble Man, Quick Man, Crash Man, Flash Man, Heat Man, and Wood Man; the second set whose designs he'd co-developed with Dr. Light, Needle Man, Magnet Man, Gemini Man, Hard Man, Top Man, Snake Man, Spark Man, and Shadow Man (riding a Kerog); Dr. Cossack's set of stolen robot masters, Bright Man, Toad Man, Drill Man, Pharaoh Man, Ring Man, Dust Man, Dive Man, and Skull Man; Dark Man's followers, Gravity Man, Wave Man, Stone Man, Gyro Man, Star Man, Charge Man, Napalm Man, and Crystal Man; the robots from the World Tournament, Blizzard Man, Centaur Man, Flame Man, Knight Man, Plant Man, Tomahawk Man, Wind Man, and Yamato Man; the robot masters that had sprung Dr. Wily from jail after his capture and from when Bass had first appeared, Freeze Man, Junk Man, Burst Man, Cloud Man, Spring Man, Slash Man, Shade Man, and Turbo Man; the robot masters who had once been powered by Evil Energy,

Tengu Man, Astro Man, Sword Man, Clown Man, Search Man, Frost Man, Grenade Man, and Aqua Man; Dr. Light's creations who had been co-opted after an enforced decommissioning, Concrete Man, Tornado Man, Splash Woman, Plug Man, Jewel Man, Hornet Man, Magma Man, and Galaxy Man; those that had been infected with roboenza and gone renegade, Blade Man, Pump Man, Commando Man, Chill Man, Sheep Man, Strike Man, Nitro Man, and Solar Man; the freshly revived Genesis Unit, Buster Rod G, Mega Water S, and Hyper Storm H; King's revolutionaries, Dynamo Man, Cold Man, Ground Man, Pirate Man, Burner Man, and Magic Man; the Dimensions, Dangan Man, Konro Man, Aircon Man, Komuso Man, the twin Clock Men, and Compass Man; CRORQ's minions, Sonic Man, Volt Man, Dyna Man, Bit Man, Shark Man, Wave Man/Water Man, Oil Man/Grease Man, Blade Man/Razor Man, and Torch Man; and the Constellation Droids, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces rounding out the army. None of the Stardroids thankfully.

And leading the charge instead of a roboticized master was the unmistakable form of Doc Robot.

Everyone braced themselves for the oncoming clash, and Sonic continued where he'd left off.

"This is what we live for."

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1) Hermes is exaggerating. They'd eventually recover, but it still wouldn't be pleasant to experience.

2) Oh, so the Egg Denizens *weren't* a throwaway reference?

3) Honestly, Vector seems like a typical bumbling detective, and then he goes and pulls of stuff like this.

4) Looper? Possible end of a universe looming? Sonic's still Sonic.

5) Omega *has* to be an incarnation of the Moar Dakka trope.

6) You have to admit, it's not like him to pass something like that up.

7) Whoops.

8) The CRORQ Numbers occasionally get hit by the One Steve Limit in-universe. Just because.

9) Big Man was a gag character in Mega Man issue 27's Short Circuits section. How hard could he be?

10) And it's a long fly ball to left field... HOME RUN!

11) I suspect he wasn't the only one either.

12) Aw, nuts. A puzzle boss... And I don't think they picked up anything that fits that criteria in their inventory... Crap, an *unsolvable* puzzle boss.

13) Oh. That's how hard.

14) Shadow's subspace pocket is host to one of the fastest growing gun collections in the multiverse.

15) Maybe not so unsolvable after all...

16) Oh, that's what happened to her. I was wondering about that.

17) Interior decorating for the blooded warrior.

18) Guess who Cream replaced one Loop.

19) Wait... Charmy Bee was James Bond once?

20) Ladies and gentlemen, Big the Cat. Debuting in *Sonic Adventure* , he's a simple guy who enjoys fishing and hanging out with friends. His life outlook is so simple in fact that no one can tell if he's looping because his behavior wouldn't be any different. Big's also a freaking tank of a warrior, and he's never happy when people try to hurt his friends.

In case anyone's wondering, his pal Froggy was left back home for this adventure when Big was captured.

21) Bass definitely has the Wily family ego…

22) I *had* to do this. Blues already has the scarf for it after all.

And, for the curious, here's the Egg Denizen List:

Mother - Echidna

Father - Typheus/Typhon

Kraken - Cetus

Dawn - Hemera

Dusk - Nyx

Flower - Persephone

Wild - Pan

Box - Pandora

Crossroad - Hecate

Gorgon - Medusa

Cyclone - Aeolus

Joker - Eris

Barbarian - Heracles

Cup - Hebe

Meme - Mnemosyne

Vengeance - Nemesis

Storm - Zeus

Consort - Hera

Tide - Poseidon

Harvest - Demeter

Knight - Ares

Princess - Aphrodite

Prophet - Apollo

Hunter - Artemis

Forge - Hephaestus

General - Athena

Racer - Hermes

Vine - Dionysus

Hearth - Hestia

Reaper - Hades

Loop 1 Part 5: Final Showdown!

Mega Loop 1.0 Part 5: Final Showdown on the Wily Egg!

Dr. Light sighed to himself in his new, more spacious, cell. Not that this change was for his comfort, of course. No, it was because Ivo and Albert each wanted to sic one of their minor robot minions on him for sport. Luckily for himself, the motobug and metool had bumped each other and started fighting amongst themselves, leaving him alone to try and talk reason to his captors.

He wasn't sure how, but he knew some of what the forces they were playing with were supposed to do, as well as a fair amount of Ivo's history. For some reason, it felt like the information had come from Rouge, but the woman hadn't had the time to speak to him about such matters.

Regardless, his pleas for reason had fallen on deaf ears. Albert had glared at him in defiance when he dropped the name of Ra Moon and the rest of the forces he'd tried to control and failed. After a similar treatment, Ivo had given him a calculating look that gave Thomas chills he only managed to hide due to years of martial arts meditation practice.

Dr. Thomas Light turned to look at the decimated remains of his two attackers, and pondered. His captors were beyond reason, not that he'd held much hope for better after so many years of failed attempts, but he'd had to try. Now it was time to see if he could perhaps take a slightly more active role in the current conflict.

With that in mind, Dr. Light bent over the remains of the two robots and went to work.

The war against the robot master army was underway. Duels were breaking out between members of each faction left and right, powers and weapons were flying fast and thick, groups of robot masters were pressing in on the heroes' outnumbered allies, the animal support units were harassing various robot masters, and in general the chaos was total.

Rock had found himself facing off against the multi-weapon robot master known as Doc Robot, rebuilt and refitted to wield the full array of roboticized master weapons. Acoustic Blaster met Mighty Blow met Piko Hammer met Rabbot Laser met Black Wave met Omega Gatling and on and on in a seemingly endless dance of weapons and violence.

"Give it up Doc Robot!" Rock yelled defiantly as he countered Rapid Stinger shots with the Trick Sword. "You can't stop me from defeating you and getting to the doctors!"

"Gya-ha-ha-ha!" Doc Robot laughed at him, switching to the Ray Glide, causing Rock to counter with the Tail Wind. "I know you'll get past us! It's what you do!"

"Then why fight me like this?" Rock demanded as he used the Chroma Camo to dodge a shot from the Chaos Cannon and then fired back with the Shockwave Boomer.

"Because!" Doc Robot cackled, countering with the Sharp Knuckle and switching to the Electric Blades as Rock switched to the Omochao weapon. "I don't have to stop you from getting to them! I just have to force you to drain your weapon energy before you get there!" (1)

Rock winced and changed to the Stealth Mine as Doc Robot opened fire with the Psycho Burst. *'And it's working too,'* he realized. Doc Robot was too unpredictable to continue on without disabling, killing him would allow the doctors to simply time clone him and send him right back out, and fighting him like this was causing Rock to burn through his weapon energy much faster than he'd like.

Hydrokinesis met Fire Tornado as Rock tried to figure out how to end this faster.

E-123 Omega and Napalm Man stood fifty paces apart and did their level best to shell each other.

"None can stand against a walking arsenal like me!" Napalm Man declared, firing a barrage of explosives,

"Please. Back of the line, pea-shooter," Omega shot back both verbally and with his numerous automatic weapons.

Blues was busy dueling both Yamato Man and Knight Man at once, fending off attacks with his shield on one side and his buster on the other while Beat covered him from the air.

Shadow focused as he and Top Man raced around the battlefield neck and neck. *'I am* not *letting Sonic interrupt our duel this time!'*

Shade raced around the side of the crater towards the giant statue of Eggman (a matching one of Wily opposite) where she planned to run up the arm to the platform in the center that held the teleporter into the Wily Egg. She needed to decode the password so that a small strike team consisting of Sonic, Rock, and Roll could infiltrate the battlestation and confront the doctors while the rest of them kept the robot master army busy.

"Gah!" Sally cried as she was hit with a blast of sound from the trident of an aquatic-themed robot that had snuck up on her.

"Hey, poser!" Sonic yelled as he Spin Dashed straight through the robot master known as Sonic Man. "Hands off my girl!"

"What do you mean *your* girl?!" Sally yelled back, fending off a sudden attack by the electrified stretching arms of Clown Man with her energy blades. "Check the ego, mister!"

"Hey, the ego's always been my little problem," Sonic grinned at her as he pounced on a robot with a light bulb head, Bright Man if he recalled correctly. "Besides, you know you love it!"

'Some might say that's my *little problem,'* Sally retorted silently as she fought on. (2)

Antoine glared at his opponent as they crossed blades. Sword Man was proving to be quite skilled.

"You are quite the worthy opponent," the robot master complimented him.

"You are ze digne adversaire yourself, yes?" he allowed as the two continued to duel.

Blaze sweated from where she was pinned down by the combined flames of Heat Man, Flame Man, Solar Man, Pharaoh Man, Magma Man, Torch Man, Konro Man, Aries, and Burner Man.

"I am the guardian of the Sol Emeralds..." she stated defiantly. It was more true now than it ever was in the baseline with a set stored safely in her subspace pocket. She could feel their power, but initiating a super transformation now would be wasteful. Her own would be plenty. "... *I* command their firey power..."

A pillar of flame erupted from her and engulfed the surrounding robots.

"I command *all fire!* "

Marine was in a similar situation as her friend. Surrounded on all sides by aquatic robot masters; Aqua Man, Pump Man, Wave Man, Mega Water S, Pisces, Virgo, Splash Woman, Pirate Man, and Shark Man; attempting to drown her or otherwise use the deluge of water the others were putting out against her.

Concentrating as hard as she could, she forced the water to burst outward and sweep her adversaries away.

"Ha!" she pointed dramatically. "That's what ye get when ye challenge the great captain Marine!"

" *Ha!* " Silver taunted as he immobilized Magic Man, Dyna Man, and the twin Clock Men with his psychokinesis. "The doctors are fools to send you against me! No robot is immune to my power!"

A sudden sensation of temporal manipulation swept over him and Silver found himself frozen in place. He cursed mentally for forgetting about this guy.

"Nor are *you* immune to *ours* ," Flash Man sneered.

As the robot proceeded to then obsess over Silver's hair, for whatever reason, the temporally displaced hedgehog did his best to access the Time Stones he'd become guardian of over the course of the Loops and use their power to break the temporal freezing holding him in place. Actual time travel outside what was 'supposed' to happen in a Loop iteration tended to cause him to 'exit' that Loop and Awaken in a later one. Plus, Hermes had 'politely' informed him that the full extent of the Time Stones' temporal abilities were sealed off for the duration of the Loops to prevent paradoxes. But they still should be able to counter the robot's time manipulation... (3)

If only he could get them to work... Damn but his time powers were rusty from disuse.

Rotor twitched as Oil Man (or was it Grease Man?) doused him with a stream of foul-smelling crude. He might be a mechanic, but dealing with Eggman's environmentally unfriendly operations had left him with a special burning anger for those who polluted.

He was going to leave this bot in so many pieces that the doctors wouldn't be able to reassemble him with two factories and the relevant blueprints.

Espio and Shadow Man bowed respectfully to each other before blurring into motion.

Snake Man fired his Search Snake weapon wildly, but his adversary was just too close and too relentless to actually aim in the right direction.

"Yer a disgrace to reptiles everywhere!" Vector spat as he continued brawling with the serpentine robot master.

"Whoa-oa-oa-oa!" Charmy yelled as he flew through air, dodging the drones Hornet Man was firing at him. *'Why did my spy tux have to be incinerated? I could have used it right about now!'* (4)

When faced with Gravity Man, Big did the first thing that seemed like it might work.

He *sat* on the spacetime robot.

Stone Man's fist met that of Knuckles, and the former shattered into a slew of bricks.

"This guy hits like Guts Man!" the robot master worriedly reformed his arm while his echidna opponent whipped around to shatter a

block fired at him by Concrete Man.

"Ha!" Volt Man proclaimed to his opponent. "Nothing can get through my Force Field!"

"We'll just see about that!" Mighty challenged and punched the energy barrier as hard as he could.

Volt Man went flying, Force Field and all, into several robot masters a fair distance away. (5)

Rouge grimaced as she evaded the sound wave attack of her pursuer.

"Come now, m'lady," the vampire-like Shade Man grinned after her, "give up this pointless resistance and rejoin the classier company of our side!"

'That's it,' she declared mentally, *'I'm putting one of my heels through his CPU.'*

As soon as the battle has begun, Tails had whipped the Tornado out from his subspace pocket and taken to the skies. He was currently engaged in an aerial dogfight against Tornado Man, Wind Man, Gyro Man, Tengu Man, and Cloud Man.

"Come on!" he shouted at the robots as he evaded their weapons and returned fire with the Tornado's main gun. "That all you got?!"

Amy's Piko Hammer struck the chin of Taurus, the minotaur-form Constellation Droid, and laid him out flat. The pink hedgehog then charged off to engage her next opponent.

Ray wondered what he was doing here as he struggled against the immense winds produced by his opponent, Air Man. Both Sonic and the Chaotix kept telling him that he was as capable as anyone, but he really didn't feel it. They told him he was 'brave' and 'awesome', but he shook with fear when facing nearly every opponent, stuttered over every other word that came out of his mouth, and every victory he gained seemed like a convergence of luck and idiocy from his perspective.

But... his friends needed him. He'd give it everything he had.

Cream had shifted to what the others called her 'were-rabbit' form for the fight. She didn't like hurting others, but these robot masters wanted to help the mean doctors hurt everyone in two universes, so they had to fight them.

She'd actually been doing rather well until her current opponent entered the fray.

"Heehee! You got big sharp pointy teeth, eh?" Grenade Man giggled as he fired Flash Bomb after Flash Bomb at the frantically dodging young rabbit and her chao. **"Well just call me Antioch!"**

Bunnie was carving a swath of destruction across the battlefield with her cybernetic enhancements when the Dimension known as Compass Man knocked her off balance.

"Oh, that's how ya want it, eh?" she narrowed her eyes. "Well, bring it, varmint!"

"I don't want to hurt you all again, but I will!" Roll shouted as she cut her way past several electrical robot masters with the Trick Sword, Tango following along in his spiked ball mode.

"I've got a bunch of powerful new weapons," she continued, switching to the Fire Tornado when she spotted a group of ice-themed robot masters, "and even more allies on my side! There's only one way this can end!"

Sonic grinned as he ran. He'd caused a multi-robot-master pile-up with the speedster crowd, and a couple of others who'd hitched a ride with the first, before going after the poser who shared his name.

But it seemed Quick Man had recovered from the pile-up and come looking for round two, and so Sonic took it as an invitation to show off a bit by running back and forth across the speed-focused robot master's pursuit path. And just to taunt him, he took potshots at a bunch of other robot masters along the way.

Laugh at Skull Man being chased by Rush, cheap shot at Bubble Man's back, duck under Needle Man's spikes, run over some red dude who dropped a couple of rings he couldn't use...

'Ah, right;' he thought as he ditched the useless rings, hopped over a water attack, slid under Tomahawk Man's axe, smashed both of Search Man's heads together, Spin Dashed Junk Man to pieces, and made a face at Wave Man (or was it Water Man?) for shooting at him and missing; *'Ring Man.'*

Shaking off the stray thought, he wiped some sweat from his forehead while jumping over Ground Man, pulled a homing attack on Jewel Man, goggled at Strike Man's terrible aim as he hit Buster Rod G instead, ground his way down the monkey-robot's staff into a flying kick at Quick Man.

"YOW!" the boomerang-slinging robot master yelped as he was knocked off balance.

"You're *quick* Quick Man, but you're not *fast* !" Sonic chortled to himself as he whipped out the old taunt from when he'd last done this verbatim, coasting over a missile from Dive Man that went

straight for Drill Man as he did so. *'Ah, nostalgia. Hmm... Better not get too caught up in this. Shade should be finished cracking the password soon and we'll need to move fast when that happens.'*

"Really! Hate! That! Hedgehog!" Quick Man cursed as he tumbled along the ground again.

Bass leaned against a... large cylindrical object (heck if he cared what it was for) in the Wily Egg's command center, brooding while the doctors watched the massive brawl going on below. His father was cheering like a maniac, which was really rather embarrassing, and Eggman...

Eggman had been watching the whole thing calmly when all Bass's experience with the man said he should be acting just as loony as Bass's old man was. Something was up.

"Not enjoying the show?" he prodded his dad's 'friend'. Yeah, like that was gonna last.

"Just teasing apart a mystery..." Eggman replied, sounding a little distracted.

Bass was about to follow up on that when the man's servant, Orbot if he remembered right, came in to give a report. Bass idly noted something about an unauthorized transmission when Orbot's fellow lackey, Cubot, was dragged into the room by Treble, the accent-prone robot trying desperately to pull Treble back with a leash.

'Why that...' Bass saw red. *'No one does that to my dog!'*

Bass was too preoccupied with trying to stomp the small yellow bot's cube form to note Eggman leaving the room with Metal Sonic.

Rock got an interesting idea and switched to Big Man's Fishing Rod weapon, turning indigo and purple with white trim, to try it out.

"Huh?" Doc's eyebrow went up in confusion. "I don't recognize that weapon..."

"Good," Rock proclaimed as he took full advantage of the Doc Robot's convenient distracted state. The industrial-strength fishing line wrapped around the multi-weapon master and bound his arms to his side, and then Rock yanked with all his might to drag his opponent to him. (6)

"Gya-ha-ha-ha! You should have said you wanted to make this up close and personal!" Doc Robot exclaimed gleefully as his body flew towards Rock and collided with the smaller robot who had switched back to his base weapon.

"I just needed to make sure you couldn't dodge," Rock replied flatly, bracing himself from falling over, as his Mega Buster finished charging and he fired straight into Doc Robot's waist from point blank range.

Doc Robot's lower half was separated from his top half rather spectacularly and the bound half-a-robot fell to the ground, cackling. "Gya-ha-ha! Not bad, Rock old boy! Ruthless and efficient! Just how it should be! Come on and finish me off! You've earned it!"

"No," Rock's statement shut the insane robot up. "As long as you're still functioning, the doctors can't time clone you. So I'm just going to put you out of the way for now and see what we can do after all this is finished."

Rock tuned out Doc's outraged ranting as he looked around for a good spot to stash him. By coincidence, he was near the spot where the entire group had reconvened. He could tell from the pulsing orb Shadow had casually tossed behind him when the robot master army had descended. Why he'd done that instead of put it in the subspace pocket Sonic had told him nearly all loopers had (and had told him the basics of performing), Rock didn't know. He could have just been trying to look cool. It certainly wouldn't be the first case of showboating overriding common sense in that group.

"Here, you can keep the glowing orb company," Rock propped Doc up on a rock near the object and proceeded to return to the battle.

"Damn you!" Doc yelled after him. "You get back here and kill me proper before I come and bite your legs off!"

Sonic was standing atop a downed Crash Man when Shadow called him over.

"Sonic! Shade's contacted Proto Man," the currently gun-toting black hedgehog informed him, and Sonic immediately raced over to where the red robot was convening with Rock and Roll while Beat, Omega, Knuckles, Rotor, and Vector – the latter spraying the fire breath technique he'd picked up somewhere Sonic couldn't recall at the moment – covered them.

"Blues?" Roll questioned as the two hedgehogs skidded to a stop, Shadow joining the group covering them.

"Shade's cracked the code," Blues informed them, all business. "We need to get you three up there *now* to strike at the doctors while we have the opportunity."

"All right," Rock agreed, not even bothering with the argument for staying to help against the robot master army he'd tried in the baseline. Blues was right, the doctors came first. Plus, everyone down here was perfectly capable of handling the situation.

"Tango!" Roll called her support unit over while Rock called for Rush as well. "I need your jet mode!"

" *Yo* Ray! I need a pick-up!" Sonic called out to his old friend to fly him to the teleporter platform over the middle of the crater. He vaguely recalled asking Tails in the baseline, but the fox was currently in a dogfight with multiple robot masters in the Tornado. In short order the three of them were rocketing over the crater towards the teleporter.

"Y-y-you sure this is a g-good idea, S-Sonic?" Ray stuttered as he carried the hedgehog. "I-I mean, th-there's a *l-lot* of r-r-robot m-masters still there..."

"Which is that much less standing in the way of the me and the wonder twins once we get inside that big battle station," Sonic reminded the nervous squirrel, before grinning. "Besides, I know you can handle 'em."

The success chance had been on a steady decline ever since the combined heroes of both Loops had engaged the robot master army. As Eggman began his trek down towards the prison cells, the rate at which it dropped accelerated.

And then Eggman made an unscheduled stop that caught Hermes' attention. "Is that what I think it is?"

Hephaestus diverted some of his attention to check, and swore. "Aw... nuts. I was hoping the changes had prevented *those* from occurring..."

"No such luck," Hermes winced. "And they *are* changed. Otherwise we'd have seen this coming..."

"Drat! Let's see... Blues? No! Duo? Anyone?"

"Well-well-well," Eggman interrupted Dr. Light's attempt to communicate with the forces outside the Wily Egg. The captured scientist hid the device he'd cobbled together with a speed almost worthy of the hedgehog, but in an effort that was ultimately pointless. "Aren't we resourceful?"

The wall to the cell slid up as Eggman and Metal Sonic stared sinisterly at the prisoner while the eternal adversary of Sonic continued. "You know, it's rather strange. You knew things about what we were doing here that were simply impossible to divine

yourself. I might have believed that Rouge had relayed this to you had we not captured and roboticized her before she even had the chance. It's quite the mystery you see. But it's clear that you're a very resourceful man, Thomas. The communicator you built from scavenged robot parts proves it. But knowing what you do? Perhaps a little *too* resourceful. Yes..."

Dr. Eggman turned and ordered Metal Sonic to bring the doctor along, as well as gesturing to a third figure to follow as well.

"What in the world...?" Dr. Light exclaimed upon seeing the additional member of the group.

"Just a little side effect of the unique Zone we're in," Eggman waved Light's surprise off. "Not as important as the fact that Albert was right about you being trouble. I'll admit, I've clearly underestimated you. A mistake I won't make twice, not when I'm *this close* to winning."

"Wait a moment!" Dr. Light struggled futilely against Metal Sonic's hold as Eggman went up to a button on the wall with clear warning labels and pressed it, the floor of the immense chamber opening up to reveal the air beneath the battlestation as he did. The wind rushed past as the pressure inside and outside equalized. "You don't need to–"

"Probably not," Eggman interrupted the man, "but I *want* to. Goodbye Dr. Light."

And with that, Metal Sonic threw the good doctor through the opening towards the crater below.

"Go after him," Eggman ordered the other figure as he waved cheerfully at the falling doctor.

"Of course, sir," the figure said with Dr. Light's voice and jumped out as ordered.

Hermes swore as he and Hephaestus typed furiously at their terminals. The moment Dr. Light had been tossed out of the Wily Egg, the success chance had begun *plummeting* . At this rate it would hit zero about the same time Dr. Light hit the ground.

SAVE DR. LIGHT!

That was the thought that flashed through everyone's minds at the same time that the simultaneous cry of "DAD!" from both Rock and Roll was heard all across the battlefield.

Sonic swore to himself as he landed on the teleporter platform. How the hell had he forgotten about *this?!* Rush and Tango had apparently hit their afterburners, but it wasn't going to be enough of a boost.

"Mega Man to *anyone!* " he could hear the blue bomber plead over his radio. "Dr. Light is in free-fall on the north side! Roll and I are en route, *but were not gonna make it!* "

"Somebody help!" he heard Roll pleaded over her own radio. " *Please!* "

"C-can you–" Ray started to ask Sonic before being cut off by the also-panicking hedgehog.

"The dude's falling right into the crater!" He yelled as he raced back and forth across the platform, nearly running Shade over as he did. "I can't – somebody get up there!"

Blaze was halfway to a super mode transformation, the only thing she knew fast enough to make it, when she heard Shadow make his own attempt.

"CHAO–ung!" the dark hedgehog fell, dazed, from a lucky blow to the head.

Looked like it was up to her after all. She finished calling on the full power of the Sol Emeralds and sped off as Burning Blaze, reaching mach speeds in an instant.

She reached the father of the one who had restored her in moments and slowed down enough to catch him without doing the man injury. She pulled up in her flight... and spotted a *second* Dr. Light falling above the first.

It was obvious to anyone that one was a fake, but she simply didn't have time to work out *which* at the moment. She grabbed the second Dr. Light and accelerated back across the crater. It was towards the battlefield, yes, but it was also the only place with people who could defend the good doc–

GET DR. LIGHT AWAY FROM THE FAKE NOW!

The sense of panic that surged through her caused her to look back at her passengers just in time to see the face of one detach and begin to flip around. Without hesitation, Burning Blaze flung the other Dr. Light towards her allies as hard as she could without hurting him while also halting the forward movement of herself and the fake.

"Paradox Light is happy to be exploding on you today," came the cheery voice of her remaining passenger. (7)

Whether it was feline curiosity or sapient reflex didn't matter. It still meant that Burning Blaze looked back at the fake she held to see its face had been replaced with a digital readout.

A digital readout with a countdo–

KA-BOOM

(Commercial break by LordCirce)

A group of students in coal-grey uniforms sit in a classroom. All of them look bored, staring blankly off into space. A solemn, slightly grating violin plays in the background.

At the front of the room, a blonde woman dressed in a grey schoolteacher uniform sits at her desk. Slowly, she looks up.

"Do your days feel gloomy and grey? Do they lack a certain bounce and jiggle? Do they seemed to be filled with endless studying, with no breaks in sight?"

"Well not anymore!" She stands and rips off the uniform, revealing a sparkling pink bikini, dotted with sequins. Color seems to fly through the classroom, causing the students to sit upright. The doors to the classroom burst open, and several bouncy girls bearing banners proclaiming "Eiken Club!" danced into the classroom.

The blonde woman turned to face the camera. "Hi, I'm Aphrodite, and I am here to brighten your day. Too often, school days are boring and grey. Now, they will be bright, pink, and bouncy! With the Eiken Club, you will get to explore new places," the camera pans to several boys falling into the cleavage of some of the Eiken girls, "meet beautiful people," a circle of boys stand staring at some of the girls, "and maybe, even meet the woman of your dreams." Aphrodite turns and winks, causing several of the boys to faint with nosebleeds. She giggles.

Then, a hole rips in the air over the desk, and Haruhi Suzumiya leaps through, landing in a pose, before giving a thumbs up. "I'm Haruhi, and I approve this message!"

(End commercial break)

Hephaestus twitched at his terminal. Whoever taught his wife how to send spam mail that opened itself was going to die.

Painfully.

Dr. Light felt more than heard the explosion behind him as he hurtled unaided through the air towards the battlefield below. Or the crater. He wasn't sure if he'd impact the ground at the peak or the cliffside below it. And then he was cut out of his musings by a pair of hands grasping his arms.

"Gotcha!" his savior, a yellow-furred squirrel – flying at that – proclaimed as he desperately wrestled with Dr. Light's momentum. He managed though, and the two were rewarded with a rough, but thankfully injury-free landing.

"–CONTROL!" finished Shadow as he warped in next to them, carrying an unconscious, and decidedly non-Burning, Blaze in his arms.

"Stay down, doctor," Shadow ordered. "Our comrades will provide cover for both you and Blaze."

"I will protect the flabby, hairy man and the burning lady of beautiful destruction!" (8) Omega proclaimed in his typical monotone from one side of the group as Blues took up guard on the other.

"Proto Man to Mega Man and Mega Woman – We have Dr. Light," Blues then turned to the father he'd estranged himself from. "...Are you hurt?"

"I'll be fine," Dr. Light told him a little breathlessly. He might have a few nightmares over this later, but for now he could hold it together.

"He's unharmed, and it looks like Blaze will recover as well," Blues reported over the radio to his brother before detaching his Sit-Rep shades from the helmet – that particular upgrade had been a gift from Dr. Cossack immediately after he'd been acquitted for his actions when Wily blackmailed him with his daughter's safety – and handing the shades-less helmet to Dr. Light. "Here," he told the

surprised scientist, who'd been about to request exactly this as a blast of water from Pump Man splashed against the shield before Shadow could engage the robot master. "Make it quick. We're in the middle of a war zone."

Mighty arrived to reinforce the defensive formation in time to fend off Knight Man as Dr. Light made the call.

Doc Robot cackled as the orb finished grafting itself to the shattered base of his torso. "Who'd have guessed that they'd have kept you around? Gya-ha-ha-ha!"

The programming from the orb attempted to infiltrate his neural net and take over, but he'd been designed by Dr. Wily to be intamperable. Or rather, unreformable. It amounted to almost the same thing in the end.

"Gya-ha-ha! Not bad... Reaper, is it? Yes... we're the same now aren't we?" the mad robot spoke with himself. "Not quite mad Doc Robot, but not entirely the Egg Denizen known as Reaper either... We shall be known as Doc Reaper! All shall tremble in fear as we cut them down! Oh, Rock old boy, I'm gonna have to thank you for this! Assuming you live... Hehehe."

'Doc Reaper' produced a pair of scythe blades from his arms that shredded the fishing line binding him... and promptly fell over as he tried to move. "Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's right! We still don't have any legs! We'll go and collect our old ones, and then we'll carve down all in our path!"

With that, the mad conglomeration of two machines crawled along the ground to where Rock had left the shattered remains of Doc Robot's lower body. (9)

"Mega Man, Mega Woman, do you copy?" came the welcome voice of Dr. Light over the radios of Rock and Roll as they approached the

teleporter platform once again.

"Dr. Light!" Roll choked down a grateful sob, making to continue past the platform and towards her father. "Hold on, I'll be right there and–"

"No," the no-nonsense tone of their creator cut her off. "I'll be fine. Right now you both are needed on the Wily Egg, the doctors' flying fortress. You need to stop Dr. Eggman and Dr. Wily. You need to save our world and Sonic's world, and all the worlds in our two universes! Go, my children. Be the heroes we need you to be."

"O-okay," Roll wiped her tears away.

"Stay safe!" Rock offered as he and his sister descended towards the doctors' teleporter platform. "We'll see you when this is done!"

"Hey you two," Sonic greeted them as they landed. "Ray lit out of here in the direction Blaze tossed your dad like someone strapped a rocket to him. I think he might have been moving before she even tossed him. Your dad okay? Any word on Blaze?"

"Yes," Shade cut in. "Dr. Light is uninjured and while Blaze was knocked out of her super mode by the blast, she is otherwise unharmed."

Sonic whistled. Super forms were practically invincible. Actually knocking someone out of one instead of running the transformation out? That took some serious force. Being in super mode was probably the only thing that had saved Blaze's life.

"Too close for comfort," Rock's eyes narrowed. "We need to *end* this."

"I would like to come with you and sabotage the doctors' fortress from within," Shade offered.

"Not that good an idea," Sonic grimaced. "No offense, but Rouge is at least as good a saboteur as you are, and she came out a robot

when she tried. No telling what they have off whatever obstacles are set up for me and the Lights."

Shade was silent for a moment. "Point taken. Please step onto the teleporter."

"Rush, Tango," Roll told their support units. "Stay here and take Shade back with you. Help her out as much as you can."

Shade huffed indignantly. "I am perfectly capable of–"

"We know," Rock cut her off, "but there's a good chance we may need them to fly up reinforcements to save us at the last minute and they can't do that if they're with us."

"Very well," Shade sighed as she activated the teleporter and sent the trio on into the Wily Egg.

The rescue of Dr. Light had stopped the rampant freefall the success chance had gone into, but it was still dropping. Much slower than it had been, but the downward trend continued nonetheless. As the trio of heroes entered the Wily Egg, the success chance reached half what it had been when the battle with the robot masters had begun.

Hephaestus scrambled to analyze data and figure out just what it was that his potential loopers were headed towards.

Rouge descended towards the scientist she'd once again gotten captured while trying to help. Her own fault, really, for not paying more attention to things. "Long time no see, Doc!" she greeted the man who was still wearing his eldest son's helmet while said son shielded the scientist from an attacking Gemini Man.

"Good to see you're safe, agent Rouge." Dr. Light returned her greeting as he finished scavenging robot master parts from downed robot masters (who had been time cloned and sent right back out).

He began to tinker with them as she came lower. "How goes the battle?"

"Not so hot. We're severely outnumbered. Any *one* of these robot masters would be a challenge," she replied, seeing an opening to dive towards one of the Gemini Men she saw. It was true enough. Even though most of them were experienced loopers, Dr. Wily did really good work with his robot masters. Their biggest saving grace was still the fact that each member of the army was designed to fight solo rather than as a united force. They were getting in each other's way as often as not. "We can't – *ugh* , stupid decoys!" Had she mentioned lately that she hated holographic opponents?

"Don't give up," Dr. Light encouraged her from his tinkering while Blues shielded him from a laser fired by the real Gemini Man. Rouge took a moment to admire the red raider. Blues actually made the pompadour hairstyle work.

"The boys have made it into the Wily Egg, so this should be over soon. And I'd anticipate reinforcements any time now," the scientist continued as he stood up, revealing a cobbled-together Mega Buster over his left forearm, turned, and fired on Gemini Man who fell over stunned and immobile.

Rouge gaped at what she'd just witnessed the man do. Even knowing he'd performed that same feat in the baseline failed to make it any less impressive. (10)

"Give us a second to stabilize the portal," Dr. Lalinde informed Duo as she and Tempo worked on the task, Dr. Cossack working with Auto on a different project off to the side. "The lab's computers have only done this once before."

Duo said nothing as he watched the energy form into a swirling portal framed by a golden ring.

"There," Noele Lalinde nodded with satisfaction, "That should be stable enough to–"

"Thank you doctor," Duo interrupted. "I will handle things from here. Please do not follow me until I have forwarded the environmental data back through the portal. I can sense something not right about what is on the other side."

"Understood. Be careful," Lalinde agreed as the space robot flew through the portal. "And good luck."

"How's the battle going Albert?" Dr. Eggman cheerfully strode back into the command center, totally missing the frantic gestures of his lackeys Orbot and Cubot to remain silent and turn back. As a result, he was caught completely off guard when Albert grabbed him and slammed him against the wall in fury.

"YOU TRIED TO KILL THOMAS!" Dr. Wily roared, sending Ivo's lackeys into their geometric forms in fear. Even Bass's eyes were a touch wider than usual at the unexpected ferocity his father was showing. (11)

"Of course!" Eggman admitted in surprise and confusion. "He knew too much and was trying to contact our enemies! He had to be dealt with!"

" *NO!* " Wily roared again, throwing Eggman bodily to the ground in his adrenaline-fueled rage. "Not like that! Thomas is a nuisance, but I *won't* see him *MURDERED!* "

Metal Sonic simply floated off to the side observing the confrontation and making no move to help his creator.

"What?" Eggman cried in bewilderment as he got to his feet and pointed accusingly at his partner. "You *hate* him! I thought you'd be *happy!* "

" *IDIOT!* " Wily roared back, as opposite of happy as humanly possible. "I want him embarrassed, humbled, and defeated, not *dead!* "

"What about the whole 'eyes on the prize' line you gave me?" Eggman accused, preparing to defend himself.

"Thomas on his knees *is* my prize!" Wily screamed back as he leapt bodily at his partner.

" *Hey!* Old guys!" Bass decided to break this up before the doctors completely forgot why they were originally here in their efforts to maim each other. "Mega Man, his sister, and his animal pal are on board, or are you too busy slap-fighting to care?"

Reminded of what was happening by both Bass's words and the monitor's display showing exactly that, the doctors broke up and attempted to act nonchalant.

" *Hmph* ," Dr. Wily straightened his labcoat. "Send the Mega Man Killers and tell those other three to get ready. That should at least slow them down long enough for us to finish preparations."

"Yes," Dr. Eggman begrudgingly agreed as he dusted himself off. "Metal Sonic, take Bass and guard checkpoint X. If they defeat Albert's pet project there, then it's up to you two to finish them."

Bass didn't miss the ugly looks the doctors shot each other before they exited the room. However, nearly everyone was so preoccupied with the drama between the doctors that they didn't see the notice on the console regarding the detection of a new 'denizen' forming. And everyone else also missed Metal Sonic pressing a few buttons to begin the conversion of this new denizen into a mechanical weapon to be teleported to the battle below before he moved to obey Eggman's orders.

The battle halted as the roar of something enormous emerged from the crater, and every eye turned towards it to see if it would prove friend or foe. The ground rumbled as a figure at least a giant head taller than the Egg Denizens: Mother and Father climbed its way up onto the plateau.

It was humanoid with a permanent scowl upon its face, each massive hand holding an equally immense curved sickle blade. It finished its climb and stood to its full height, towering over the warriors below it.

"Tremble, mortals, before Egg Denizen: Titan!" the giant robot bellowed.

Duo sat in a meditative pose midair as he scanned the twisted dimension he found himself in. Immediately upon entering, he had felt the dimension scan him and then attempt to take something from him. Something he did not possess, which apparently frustrated whatever force was behind it.

It mattered not. The force, while certainly not benevolent, was not self-aware. It would not impede his mission. A mission that remained firm in his mind regardless of whatever force had twisted time back upon itself.

He could feel everything about this dimension. How it was originally meant to be a proving grounds for mortal supplicants; full of hazards, dangers, and evils; but also with the potential to create something wondrous at the end. Provided that the soul who gained such a boon proved Good and Just of course, otherwise it had an equal potential to create something poisonous and foul. He also felt how it had become corrupted upon fusing with a chaotic force it was never meant to mesh with, and had then become poisoned by the Evil of the doctors until the entire thing was nothing more than a parasitic tumor upon reality. A tumor poised to corrupt and destroy, or worse, no less than two entire universes.

Whatever this dimension was originally supposed to be, it had become nothing more than an abomination upon the fabric of reality.

He could sense dozens of robotic lifeforms in the distance, most of which seemed to be just beneath the notice of whatever force had tried to take from him when he arrived. And there was also a spirit of malevolence in the distance which had not existed prior to his arrival. It seemed the unknown force had taken something from him after all.

He sent a message back through the portal that no human should come through the portal until he signaled it was safe to do so. There was already Evil aplenty and Justice needed to be served.

Shadow grinned. *Finally* , something to use that special gun he'd begged off of Tails on. Whipping the thing out of his subspace pocket caused nearly every eye in the vicinity to widen comically. It was: A. Really. Big. Freaking. Gun.

It was at least three times Shadow's size, with at least four lesser cannon barrels attached to the main one, a few machine gun attachments, a couple of missiles mounted on it, what looked like a swiss-army bayonet, and the words 'Big Bad Mamma Jamma!' painted on the side.

Save for two individuals, everyone else, organic and robot alike, backed away from Shadow.

"It is gorgeous," monotoned Omega, transfixed by the sight of the weapon.

"Aw, *yeah!* " cheered Grenade Man. "Shoot it! Shoot it!"

The Freedom Fighters recognized Rotor's work, and as one turned to the walrus.

"Hey, I only loaded it with enough ammo for one pull of the trigger," the battle mechanic defended himself as Shadow took aim at Titan

and did exactly that.

It was hard to say exactly what kind of overall blast erupted from the weapon, but it tore a hole straight through Titan's torso shaped like a cat's pupil. The previously fearsome giant robot finished splitting in twain as it crashed to the ground.

"Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha!" 'Doc Reaper' whisper-cackled as he saw the immense body of Titan fall to the ground. Forget the legs he'd just finished reattaching, *that* would be the perfect body to graft himself to and lay waste to the allies of Mega Man with. He'd just have to get across the battlefield in one piece without drawing attention to himself. Considering the chaos rampaging unchecked, no one would so much as spare him a second glance so long as he controlled himself enough to not attack them outright.

And for the kind of body he'd get as a reward, he could manage to control himself that long.

Roll tried to suppress her exasperation with her brother and his friend from another Loop. From the moment all three of them had gotten aboard the Wily Egg, those two had been such *boys* .

They had been arguing back and forth about whether or not their resident mad scientist was the driving force behind the Wily Egg's design. And not only could neither accept the other's valid points, they had these stupid grins on their faces the whole time.

All of a sudden, she was struck by the thought that if the subject they were debating had been social gossip and dating prospects, they'd have sounded *just* like stereotypical teenage girls. Roll had to fight a sudden a fit of giggles at the mental image of her brother and Sonic in the latest teen girl fashions going 'no way!' and 'ohmygod!' at each other. (12)

"It's the Mega Man Killers!" her brother's shout broke Roll out of her musings, and she reflexively brought out the weapons-grade broom she carried with her and telescoped it to full length.

Poking fun at her brother and his friend could wait until after the worlds were saved.

"The genesis chamber," Hephaestus suddenly said. The place where the doctors had their Chaos Emerald powered Genesis Wave device that could rewrite the local reality of both universes the Skaia/Zone pocket dimension was attached to from the ground up. The Chaos Emeralds were prevented from rewriting their universe's base code in Yggdrasil's system, but even one would allow this device to 'shuffle' history and people around. All seven would let the doctors use the device to basically define their own personal variant of the current iteration, which would likely be game over for the 'Mega' branch. And that was before taking Skaia's presence into account.

"Huh?" Hermes absently inquired from where he was trying to follow his loopers' battle with the robot masters.

"Yggdrasil just finished running the numbers and every single path worth mentioning puts our Anchors in the genesis chamber about the same time that the success chance will hit zero at its current rate of decline," Hephaestus continued. "The only explanation is that it's something in the genesis chamber itself that's a threat."

"Then we better get on finding it," Hermes admitted.

The Genesis Wave device was the most likely culprit for causing this attempt to fail, but... it was too obvious. It would have featured in all of the possible paths Yggdrasil had calculated since the beginning. So Hephaestus had a feeling that there was something else the doctors were going to try and use. Something he and Hermes hadn't noticed yet amidst all the data they had to sift through.

'One good Punk deserves another?' Sonic thought as he and the crimson blade-wielding robot went at each other. *'Cute, guys. Real cute.'*

Sonic decided to take this aerial and Homing Attack the guy to death, only for the robot to curl himself into a whirling spiked sawblade ball and come after him. Sonic twitched as he and his opponent ricocheted around the room. The two opponents repeatedly crashed into each other, bouncing off with little mutual harm as they did.

"STOP!"

Seriously, it wasn't enough that Wily had a robot with his name?

"STEALING!"

Nor enough that the nutcase had made a half-dozen or so speedsters of his own that had felt like challenging Sonic?

"MY!"

Who cared if this had all happened in the baseline? Did he have to suffer through having *everything* that defined him stolen by this guy *again* ?

"MOVES!"

Honestly, he got enough of that from Eggman already!

'Doc Reaper', as he now called himself, did his best to cross the battlefield undetected. It was beginning to get tiresome though. There was only so long that avoiding stray shots remained entertaining.

Something suddenly impacted the back of his head and pushed off.

"Sorry Mr. Robot!" the rabbit-thing called back as it continued to flee with a small blue... something.

"That's *Doctor* Robot!" he yelled after her despite himself. He was about to correct that too when another figure crashed into him and knocked him down.

Laughing where he lay, he swore that whoever that had been, enemy combatant or robot master, they were going to die.

Broom clashed against Barrier Spear in a rapid staccato as Roll and Enker dueled ferociously back and forth across the corridor.

"Your skills are no match for mine!" Enker boasted as he turned aside Roll's every strike, occasionally also lashing out with the Mirror Buster using the kinetic energy his spear absorbed.

"Bring it!" Roll shot back as she continued to deflect Enker's attacks in turn.

(Sneaky Doc Reaper part 2 thanks to Dalxein)

This was beginning to become tiresome again. The mad robot had taken to making a game of it, seeing how close the other combatants could get before he had to stop moving, or testing his luck and continuing to move while the battle raged around him. He'd even kept right on moving once through a mess of elemental-based Robot Masters as they were cut down, and one had stepped on the back of his head without noticing he was active. He would giggle about it if only it hadn't scuffed his skullplate. (13)

But now even that was growing tiresome. His need for stealth was paramount, and he'd run out of games that would only reasonably endanger his chances of making it through the battlefield unseen. It was like–

"Hey there, Doc Robo. You... you look terrible. You okay? Need some hel–" *PRREEEXCHRANG* Blade Man's question was cut off

as his two halves parted from one another, a sickle blade retracting into Doc Reaper's arm. Stealth was paramount, after all.

...then again, a better set of legs than he was currently making do with might've been appreciated, and while not a speedster, Blade Man wasn't slow.

Oh, blast it all, he was starting to regret that.

"Gya-ha-ha-ha~" No, on second thought, no he didn't.

Absorbing Blade Man's Blades had *nothing* to do with it, he insisted to himself.

"Ballade, stop!" Rock pleaded with his opponent even as he shot the robot's explosive Ballade Crackers out of the air. "Don't you remember? You once turned against Wily to save me! You can do it again!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" Ballade sneered as he continued his relentless barrage. "Now stand and fight me like a man!"

'Right,' Rock thought to himself as the relevant memories became clearer. *'It's not just a revised timeline. Wily's time cloned all of his robot masters from the point where they were most loyal to him. I'm just glad he stopped bothering with the original set dad made after we undid his reprogramming.'*

Ivo is a liability. A loose cannon. His actions prove it. He must be disposed of.

Dr. Wily's headache was pounding stronger than ever as he and Ivo put the finishing touches on their joint creation, the Egg-Wily Machine X. He could almost swear that his headache was forming words now, but that was ridiculous. Even for him.

He will betray you. He *has* betrayed you. He tried to take from you the victory you always deserved.

Their partnership now was strained at best, and only the promise of ultimate power and the threat of their enemies closing in combined was keeping them working together.

He is no better than the rest. He does not truly respect you like he should.

Ivo had one more chance. One. If he proved unworthy of it, then...

Eliminate him.

Then Albert W. Wily would do what he had to.

"Follow the bouncing hedgehog!" was the only warning Roll got as Sonic came ricocheting around the corner with Punk hot on his trail.

"Rock!" she called to her brother as she sidestepped out of Punk's path with reflexes honed from years of fighting all manner of robots. As Punk's blind pursuit of Sonic caused him to bisect Enker, she swung her broom-staff and knocked the Killer off-course. "Heads up!"

Rock didn't even turn as he dashed to the side and let Punk run straight into one of Ballade's explosives.

"Mega Man!" Sonic called out as Punk unwound from his ball form. "Switch!"

"Right!" Roll's brother replied as he slid under Sonic's Homing Attack on Ballade to fire on Punk who was readying a Screw Crusher.

As Punk fell to her brother's Mega Buster, Sonic's assault on Ballade caused his fired explosive to be sent off course. Straight at Roll. (14)

Roll casually deflected the bomb with her broom-staff and fired her own Mega Buster at Ballade, finishing the Killer off.

"Rock, buddy," Sonic looked impressed. "Your sister is officially awesome."

"You say that like it's news," Rock shot his sister a teasing grin.

" *Boys* ," the lone female rolled her eyes as the two males laughed.

The self-proclaimed Doc Reaper finally made it through the raging battlefield and stood before the ruin of the giant Egg Denizen: Titan. The mad robot chuckled sinisterly as the orb comprising his gut pulsed and wires snaked from the wreck to attach themselves to him.

"Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The trio of infiltrators into the Wily Egg stopped as the room they had dashed into was suddenly sealed off at both ends. A trio of figures that neither Sonic nor Rock recalled having faced in the Wily Egg in the baseline dropped from the ceiling.

"Sonic?" Rock asked. "Remember saying that 'all we needed now was a 'Silver Sonic"?"

"Yeah," Sonic apologized. "I really should know better than to tempt fate by now. Though I'm curious as to who the other two are. Kinda looks like we've got a twisted evil doppelganger theme here."

Before the trio stood their warped doubles. The massive gleaming steel Silver Sonic, spine-like blades emerging menacingly from its back, stood over twice as tall as his two companions. Two robots who were very familiar to Rock and Roll.

"Sonic, meet Quint, my future-tech clone. And Roll's future-tech clone..." Rock introduced the opponents Sonic hadn't met.

"...Waltz," Roll finished for him.

Dr. Eggman scowled from where he was personally working on the Egg-Wily Machine X at the insistence of Albert. He'd have had a badnik do the detailing, but for whatever reason Albert was *adamant* about a 'craftsman's touch' before he'd deign to pilot the thing into battle.

He'd had such high hopes for the man too. The first person he'd met who could not only match his own genius, but also seemed to understand the kinds of trials men like them were subjected to. Someone who had also gone through the constant battle to keep the rabble in its place and gotten nothing but grief for it.

The first man Ivo had ever known that he could call a peer. An equal. Maybe even a friend.

And yet Albert just *had* to cling to sentimental weakness!

Well, the Eggman knew how to deal with that.

"Welcome, Mega Man, Mega Woman, Sonic the Hedgehog," Quint greeted the trio calmly. "Welcome to your doom. There is no chance for victory, no way to escape. Our final duels will play out in this chamber."

"This guy fight half as well as he blabs?" Sonic yawned.

"Do you?" Quint's verbal jab nearly goaded Sonic to attacking in a rage, but a firm hand from Rock and a solemn shake of the blue bomber's head forestalled it. The message was clear, these were dangerous opponents not to be underestimated. Quint ignored the exchange and turned to Waltz. "You remember the plan, Waltz?"

"Of course, dear brother!" Waltz smiled and patted Quint on the back in a manner that would have seemed comforting if the divergence from the personality Rock and Roll were used to wasn't setting off alarms in their heads. "We duel them, kill them if we can, waylay them if not. Just like you said: No tricks. No games. And..."

At this, Waltz leaned over and spoke the last part right into the audio receptors in Quint's helmet.

"...No more distractions," Waltz purred.

The heroes barely noticed the start of Quint's expression changing to surprise before his forehead exploded outwards. The limp body of Rock's future double fell to the ground, revealing the smoking finger cannons of Waltz that had been at the base of his neck. (15)

"What in...?" Sonic blurted in shock, before Waltz raised her other arm towards the final companion and began pumping rapid-fire plasma shots into Silver Sonic's cranium. And all the while, she was looking at the trio of heroes with an insane grin on her face.

"Don't look so shocked!" Waltz giggled insanely as the robot hedgehog fell to the ground, its head reduced to so much scrap. "It was only fair that I got to kill him when he killed me first! And the big guy was just an eyesore, really."

"What do you want, Waltz?" Rock asked, not trusting the current turn of events in the least. Waltz was not an altruist. By *any* stretch of the imagination.

"Hmph. Party pooper," the mentally unbalanced robot scoffed. "I just want to play."

That set both Rock and Roll on edge. They knew how Waltz defined 'play'. For that matter, her tone wasn't exactly putting Sonic at ease either.

"Don't be like that!" Waltz grinned at them with an innocence no one bought. "If one of you agrees to stay and play with me, the other two can go on ahead. No strings attached!"

"And what if we say no?" Sonic glared.

Waltz's grin grew bigger. "Then I get to kill all three of you instead of just one. Makes no difference to me. I just felt like giving it the *personal* touch today you see, but if you don't wanna play that way, I'm good for the usual."

The stand off continued for several seconds before one of them stepped forward.

"Okay, Waltz," Roll told her counterpart. "You've got yourself a duel."

"Roll!" Rock tried to talk her out of it. "No! You know what she's like, an–"

"Yes, I do," Roll cut her brother off and modulated her voice so only Rock and Sonic would be able to hear. "Rock, you haven't seen her at her worst. I have. Her loose-cannon style thrives on multiple opponents. She fires too randomly to coordinate efforts, and if it's all three of us then we *will* be hurt. Badly. But one-on-one? I can take her. Please, brother. I... I need to do this. For myself."

Rock gave her a hug. "Don't die, sis."

"Aww..." Waltz interrupted. "How sweet! But this offer expires soon! Tick-tock!"

"Hold your horses," Roll glared. "I'll duel you. As soon as you let my brother and his friend go on ahead."

"Deal!" Waltz snapped her fingers and a door at the far end of the room opened up. With only a single backwards glance that silently asked if she knew what she was doing, Rock and Sonic went through the door, which closed behind them.

"Now, little Roll," Waltz taunted her opponent, "it's just you and me. And soon it'll be just me and some fashionable new accessories made from your charred remains."

Roll simply snapped out her broom-staff and made a 'bring it' gesture.

"GYA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!" the booming cackle echoed out over the battle between robot masters and the gathered allies of two worlds arrayed against the doctors. Once again, the fighting halted as participants prepared to evaluate this new development.

The body of Titan seemed to rise, not only reforming itself, but sending wires towards every downed robot master – several of which had been downed multiple times due to time cloning – and absorbing their wreckage into itself. As the thing finished standing, the cackling form of Doc Robot could clearly be seen fused in a position on the torso roughly correlating to the sternum, a pulsating orb in place of his own lower torso.

"Shadow," Rouge began dangerously. "Is that...?"

"How was I supposed to know it reanimated dead robots?" Shadow defended himself. "Besides, Sonic said not to put anything from here in our subspace pockets unless we wanted Hermes to give us a full metaphysical cavity search. And while I have no clue what that means, I have *zero* intention of finding out."

Further debate was cut off as the giant reanimated robot bellowed its voice over the battlefield.

"Prepare yourselves for the ultimate battle!" the figure cackled. "For I am no longer merely Doc Robot. No longer solely the Egg Denizen known as Reaper. I'm not even Doc Reaper now! With the body of Titan and the scavenged weapons of every fallen robot master, I am ultimate! I am supreme!"

"I am WILY ROBO EGG TARTARUS! GYA-HA-HA-HA-eh?"

Immediately after that confused shift in tone, a blue-white streak of light blasted right through the spot on 'Wily Robo Egg Tartarus's' body that 'Doc Reaper' was fused to. A moment later, the once-again lifeless form toppled over backwards into the crater as the streak of light turned around and came to a halt before Dr. Light, resolving itself into a floating blue, red, and gray robot that had to be at least eight feet tall.

"Dr. Light," Duo greeted the armed scientist formally. "I am here to help."

In the empty command room of the Wily Egg, a lone notice on the computer went unseen:

TIME-CLONE RESTORATION OF FORTRESS GUARDIANS 'ENKER', 'PUNK', 'BALLADE', 'QUINT', AND 'SILVER SONIC' AWAITING AUTHORIZATION.

AUTOMATED TIME-CLONE RESTORATION OF ROBOT MASTER 'DOC ROBOT' FAILED DUE TO CONTAMINATION BY ZONE-NATIVE ENTITY.

"Okay, seriously," Sonic prodded Mega Man as the two ran down the corridor, " *why* are we leaving your sister alone with the psycho back there if she's as bad as you say?"

"Because..." Rock sighed. "You have to understand, we don't just remember the Loop where the Crash happened. Each of us remembers a series of what might have been attempts to make us solo Anchors, all of which ended in reality crashing like an over-taxed computer program."

"Okay... That's creepy," Sonic allowed. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"I got through mine reasonably fine, all things considered," Rock informed the hedgehog. "Roll and Blues... not so much. Blues refuses to talk about what happened to him, but Roll... The whole reason Roll is doing the hero thing with me is that she lived through a couple of lives where Dr. Wily *won* . As in, 'my head mounted on a pike' won."

"Ick," Sonic made a grossed-out face. "What's any of this have to do with Waltz?"

"Because her last one featured Waltz as her version of Quint," Rock continued, "and that life traumatized her more than any of the others for some reason. All because of whatever Waltz did during it. She told me some, but I *know* I didn't get the whole story."

"I repeat," Sonic gave him a flat look, " *why* did we leave her there?"

"Because Roll needs to work this out at some point," Rock admitted. "And if we'd told her no, she'd have booted us out of there herself."

"Okay," Sonic agreed, getting an incredulous look from Rock as to how fast his attitude had reversed itself. "Hey, I know a *number* of ladies like that. They get an idea in their head to do something for their own good and you get between them and it at your ow–."

An immense tremble in the floor under their feet halted the conversation and nearly caused the two blue heroes to stumble over themselves.

Duo had been in the middle of listening to Dr. Light inform him that he and his allies could properly handle the situation now, and that his power was best spent aiding Mega Man, Mega Woman, and Sonic when he sensed it. An entity aboard the flying fortress above him.

The entity's presence had been masked until something had disturbed it, and then it blared in Duo's senses. It was strong.

Powerful. Evil. Much more so than the reanimated abomination he had slain.

The doctor was right. He was needed up there. (16)

Rock and Sonic stared up at the terrifyingly immense one-eyed blue form before them as both of their memories, partially restored and rusty alike, recalled what it was.

The Chaos Devil roared back at them with a force that shook the walls.

Roll's broom-staff twirled and deflected Waltz's plasma barrage in an intricate dance worthy of a Jedi.

'I don't care if you're the worst opponent I've ever faced,' the former household model thought in regards to her insane adversary. *'I don't care if you view murder as some form of hobby or recreation. I don't care if you might actually be able to beat me.'*

Roll's face hardened as she prepared to go on the offensive. *'I'm* done *letting fear control me.'*

"Yes!" Waltz cheered as Roll charged her through the rapid-fire finger cannon blasts. "Come closer so I can see your pretty little face better as you die in agony!"

"How do you beat these Devil things again?" Sonic yelled to Rock as he frantically dodged around watery tentacles. Damn, but he hated his rusty baseline memories. He should *know* this already!

"Expose the eye!" Rock shouted back as he fired repeatedly on the magitech hybrid monstrosity. Unfortunately the liquid was reforming as fast as his Mega Buster could part it. Right, it hadn't gone any better last time. Why couldn't his memories of this portion of his

original lifetime restore themselves just a little faster? "Which isn't working as well as it usually does! How about you and Chaos?! Something about going 'super'?!"

"Last time I used the Chaos Emeralds in my subspace pocket to go super near another full set, I broke my universe and wound up in Eiken!" (17) Sonic loudly informed him as the Chaos Devil formed a few extra tentacles to lash out with, making conversation very difficult.

Rock filed that away for later inquiry as he formed a plan. "I got an idea! Go for the eye on three!"

"Got it!" Sonic agreed, getting an odd feeling for how this was going to go and adjusted his aim accordingly.

"One!" Rock began counting and charging.

"Two!" Sonic's Spin Dash revving kicked up sparks on the metal floor.

"THREE!" As one, both heroes unleashed their attacks. The double strike of Rock's charged 'Sonic Shot' and Sonic's own Spin Dash blew a hole in the living water body of the Chaos Devil and struck the ocular control unit hard enough to make the beast roar in pain. Rock's blast burst in a flare of energy and Sonic's adjusted aim allowed him to ricochet back the way he came instead of trying to power through the living water behind the creepy robotic eye and risking being trapped in it.

"Move!" came Rock's sudden shout as the Chaos Devil retaliated with numerous limbs formed from its body. Sonic reacted without thought and dove to the side...

Just in time to be out of the way as a flaming blue fist larger than his Spin Dash form burst through the floor in an uppercut that splashed the liquid body of the Chaos Devil all over the room.

'Scrap,' Roll swore silently as Waltz caught a swing of the broom-staff in her open hand, leaving nothing between Roll and Waltz's finger cannons.

Duo focused his Justice energy on healing the bodies of the two brave souls before him as the Evil abomination slowly pieced itself together.

"I know not how events may have played out in previous instances of our lives," he calmly told the two, ignoring their looks of surprise. Ultimately, it mattered little. The events of now were of paramount concern. "However, this time the dimension we find ourselves in is worse than the parasite it might otherwise seem. It is a vile tumor upon the fabric of reality, and if it is left to grow unchecked it will poison all realities it comes in contact with. Its influence *cannot* be allowed to spread further. If this corruption is not cleansed and both universes rebalanced, the consequences will be *beyond* dire."

Duo looked the two heroes in the eye. He could sense that their souls and minds were older than their bodies would suggest. How and why this had happened was not a mystery for him to unravel. The avatar of Justice knew his place in the cosmos, and delving into the mysteries of a timeline that seemingly folded back in on itself, much less those who were caught in the repeating folds, was not it. His place was to administer Justice and maintain the balance. (18)

"Go!" he told them. "I will handle this... thing... and join you when I can."

"Thanks Duo!" Mega Man called back as the two heroes sped out of the chamber and on their way just as the 'Chaos Devil', as they called it, finished reforming and surged towards him in its tainted rage.

"I sense Evil – but also nobility," Duo told the beast as he prepared to meet its charge. It was also chaotic, but it was a noble Chaos that he sensed. The rarest and most precious kind. Something well worth

his efforts to free from its unnatural imprisonment. "You are a creature conflicted. I will purge the Evil from you."

Duo's glowing fist met the living water of the Chaos Devil's body with a tremendous splash, only for Duo to be thrown back by a swipe of multiple tentacle limbs from the beast. The space robot braced his landing with his knees and looked up to see the beast pointing a limb at him that formed a mouth in which a torrent of water was preparing to fire.

The beast roared at him, and the avatar of Justice clenched his giant glowing fist and smiled.

"I fear no Evil."

"So, what's Eiken?" Rock asked as he and Sonic raced further into the Wily Egg, blasting their way through an infestation of motobugs. "And what does it have to do with breaking the universe?"

Sonic winced. "Pretty much everyone ends up doing something sooner or later that causes a Loop to end pretty abruptly. Used to be people tried to end the Loops in creative and destructive ways before the admins got their act together and started telling people what was going on. But even now a lot of us loopers do crazy junk when we get bored that we'd never do if death was still permanent for us. Eiken's the Loop we tend to end up in when we do something really stupid. It's practically a rite of passage by now, so I'm not gonna spoil it for ya."

"Huh," Rock digested that.

"Anyway, how do you think your sister's doing?" Sonic asked.

Waltz stood above Roll as the heroic sister of Mega Man glared from where she was pinned. Waltz had one leg holding down her waist,

the other firmly planted on her Mega Buster, one hand restraining Roll's other arm, and the last hand caressing Roll's face tauntingly.

"Did you think this was going to go any other way?" Waltz taunted. "I told you. I told you it was only a matter of time until I started repeating too, right? These... Loops your brother's friend called them?"

Roll's eyes widened. *'No...'*

"I have to thank you for carrying my past self with you like you did," Waltz grinned maniacally. "I'd have never remembered if you hadn't let me scan you with the Copy Chip father gave me."

Few really understood how the Copy Chip worked. Some thought it was a part of the Variable Tool System Dr. Light had developed for Blues and adapted for her and Rock to better aid their household duties. Others believed it merely copied weapons.

But that was a fraction of what it really did. The Copy Chip allowed her and Rock to scan nearly everything about a robot they came in physical contact with. Their systems, sure, but also their data. She and her brother could even touch a robot's spirit and take with them an echo if that robot was advanced enough to have such a thing. Most robot masters barely had one, but some had more developed spirits, and a precious few like she and her brothers seemed to have true souls.

But Waltz... Waltz had something Roll could only describe as foul. Foul and *wrong* .

And... And it seemed that a small piece of that had trojaned itself in Roll that failed life when she'd scanned Waltz, and had now found its way back to Waltz. Something that could survive through the Loops. Something that could effectively Awaken any version of Waltz who came in contact with her. (19)

"I bet you thought you'd make a heroic charge, right?" Waltz abruptly shifted topic, seemingly content to torment Roll before finishing her off. "A series of 'this one's for this guy', 'this one's for that gal', 'this one's for someone I met on the subway one Thursday when it was raining', 'this one's for everything else', and of course 'this one's for me'. A fury of righteous anger, right?"

"Wrong," Roll retorted, cutting off whatever came next. There was only so much of Waltz's inane ramblings she could take, Awake or no. "I don't have any fury for me."

The musing about Waltz Awakening had reminded her. There were other souls she'd touched, other echoes she'd gained, and recently at that. Her colors shifted to cream and red as she recalled a young rabbit girl who wished for nothing so much as a world where everyone could get along and be friends, only to have people like Waltz continually tear it away from her and force kind souls like hers to fight wars they were never meant to.

"This one though," Roll glared at her tormentor. "This one's for what you tried to do to my brother."

Waltz attempted to stop Roll's legs from coming up in a kick, but she shouldn't have bothered. The Omochao drone fired from Roll's pinned arm cannon pulled a sharp turn and uppercutted the insane female robot, causing her to flail wildly and fire her finger cannons at random, not a single shot coming anywhere near the drone in her face or the captive under her feet.

Roll surged upwards as Waltz stumbled back, turning red and yellow as she channeled the spirit of the Mighty, the armadillo as kind and gentle to those in need as he was stalwart and strong in the face of adversity.

"And this one's for what you *did* do to Quint!" she roared, sinking the Mighty Blow into Waltz's gut.

"I'm still worried, but that's because she's my sister," Rock told his friend as the two dealt with a colony of battons. "I'm sure she's fine."

Ray charged into battle alongside Beat who had joined him for whatever reason. He was nervous as hell, but no one would have been able to guess as he jumped on the back of Aircon Man and began to wail on the robot master.

"And while we're on the subject of your brothers," Roll continued, shifting to yellow and white for the gift from Ray, the eternally nervous and frightened flying squirrel who nonetheless always stepped up to help his friends in times of need. She zoomed forth on the Ray Glide, closing in on the opponent she'd sent flying with her last blow, ramming into her and climbing still higher. " *This* is for what you did to Bass and Treble in that other life!"

Indiana Charmy dove stinger first at Plug Man, readying his whip. *'So glad I remembered I had this outfit!'* Charmy thought to himself.

"Actually, I'm kind of curious about the super form I'm starting to vaguely recall from last time," Rock continued as the two dodged an assault from several buzzbombers. "Any reason you haven't used it yet?"

"Yeah," Sonic replied as he did a Homing Attack combo. "Those things have a cool down period before you can use them again, so you only want to use them if you have to or know you can finish the fight with 'em."

Espio stared calmly at Crystal Man as he ninja-chopped several of the robot's Crystal Eye projectiles in half.

Roll turned black and gray as she and her opponent fell towards the ground. The spirit of Shade, an echidna stealth expert who had been caught between the order that had raised her and doing the right thing by others, echoed through her. "Speaking of the other lifetime, this is for the mall full of people you had Dangan Man gun down in cold blood!"

Waltz moved her head to the side and kicked Roll away from her, the Stealth Mine continuing on to latch into the ground and arm itself.

Marine stood protectively over a recovering Blaze as she blasted Star Man with a torrent of water. None of these bloody bounces were getting her best mate. Not while the great captain Marine had anything to say about it!

"I actually kinda collect super forms and things that can induce one," Sonic relayed as the two heroes climbed up a ladder while under fire. "Which is how I discovered 'super sickness'."

"Let me guess," Rock smirked. "You use too many super forms too fast and your system crashes hard?"

"Worse than any hangover in the multiverse," Sonic nodded. "With the *possible* exception of one caused by that Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster stuff."

Blade Man (or was it Razor Man?) fell to the ground as he was blasted by Bunnie Rabbot.

Roll touched upon the spiritual echo of the hyperactive raccoon captain, Marine, as she turned green and brown. Emotional. Dedicated. A skilled sailor and true friend.

"This is for sending Aircon Man into traffic and having him blow around cars with the people still inside!" Roll yelled as she unleashed a torrent of water at her opponent with Hydrokinesis.

Amy fought back the urge to whip out one of the big techniques she'd picked up in the Loops as she bashed yet another robot master into the ground with her hammer. Restraint. She needed to prove to Sonic and the others that she knew restraint. Over and over for however many Loops it took for them to forget any resemblance to that *other* looper known by her pink hair. (20)

"Which reminds me," Sonic hopped across a series of metools like that Mario guy had taught him one Loop for fun, "your space buddy Duo is kind of interesting. He always been like that?"

"Ha!" Rock laughed. "I remember this conversation from the baseline! We ended up talking about Wisps or something."

Shade crossed her energy-draining blades with Slash Man's claws while Rush and Tango both pounced on Centaur Man nearby.

Purple and yellow. The colors of Rotor, the walrus mechanic who would rather be tinkering in a shop and had instead been thrust into a war as a child.

"This is for the factory workers you had Konro man burn alive!" Roll fired the Shockwave Boomer, clipping Waltz as the insane robot attempted to bum rush her.

But she kept coming, firing wildly the whole way.

Knuckles grinned as his punch shattered the crystal-shaped dome protecting Chill Man's head. Man, but he loved being able to cut

loose without needing his Guardian powers!

"That's right!" Sonic recalled as the two heroes slid through a twisting pipe and out into an area bombarded by energy blasts from some sort of screw-like turrets that shot in six directions.

Rock chuckled at Sonic's enthusiasm as he blasted the turrets apart.

Sagittarius's eyes widened as Antoine cut his Blazing Arrows out of mid-air and closed in on him.

"This..." Roll began, turning brown and blue as she was filled with the echo of Sally, the ground squirrel princess turned revolutionary leader. A girl forced to grown up far too fast for the sake of her friends and people. "...is for the emergency response teams..."

As Waltz leapt at her, she ducked and then rose again with the Electric Blades, severing Waltz's right hand from her arm. " *...that you had Komuso Man slaughter!* "

Waltz stumbled backwards in pain, and tripped over the Stealth Mine that had been armed earlier.

BOOM!

Silver's Psychokinetic power clashed with Pharaoh Man's Pharaoh Shot while Vector clutched his arm where he'd been clipped by a lucky shot behind the time traveler.

"Man," Sonic continued as the two dodged around a slew of drills that flew from the floor to the ceiling, or vice versa, "you have got to find a way to my Loop sometime so we can see what you can do with one."

"Ha ha!" Rock laughed. "You never told me what they did last time!"

(This battle by masterofgames)

"Gotcha!" Rouge grinned wildly as she tackled yet another Jewel Man.

"No! NO! Not again! Get her off me!" he screamed, crying like a baby as Rouge disabled his limbs.

"Oh relax, would you? A girl has needs." Rouge rolled her eyes as she gave the enormous jewel on his head a loving caress. "We've done this a dozen times, and we'll do it as many times as I feel like. This pretty little ornament of yours gets pulled off, and goes in my pocket. Then, I finish you off, the docs time clone you in, and we do it all again! And you can't do a thing to stop me!" she teased. "Now, enough chit-chat, let's get... huh?" Rouge blinked, pausing and glancing down at her hand ruffling through her, in hindsight clearly lighter than before, belt pouch. "Great, dropped my tools somewhere..." she huffed, folding her arms in a pout.

"Oh thank the maker!"

"You hush!" she scolded, putting on a radio headset. "Tails, hun, I know you're busy, but would you be a dear and toss me a screwdriver?"

"Seriously!? Now!? I'm a little busy Rouge!" came the disbelieving response, as Tails somehow managed to swerve through the airborne robot masters in the airspace above her.

Rouge just sighed, pulling a red fedora out of her subspace pocket and plopping it atop her head. "Tails, look at me." she ordered.

Up above, Tails managed to find enough of a break in the dogfight to glance down.

Rouge grinned, she could see his eyes bulging from clear down here. "Screwdriver. NOW!" she repeated.

"Y-yes ma'am!" he squeaked, swerving to fly over her, flipping upside down, and letting one fall free from his tool belt down towards her.

Rouge snatched it out of the air with a grin. "That's a good boy."

Really, that hat was a godsend in getting the fox to do what she wanted. Tails had been in Hellsing loops before, and wanted as little to do with them as he could. And as a bat, who else was she going to be from those loops?

It would be a darn shame the day he found out it was really from her time spent as Carmen Sandiego.

'Ah well, best to deal with that when it comes.' she thought to herself, jabbing the screwdriver into Jewel Man's head and humming 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' with a smile as she started prying her prize free, while he futilely begged his fellow robot masters to help him.

Roll turned brown and pink for the cybernetic Bunnie Rabbot-D'Coolette. The lapine southern belle with a temper that burned as bright as her passions. Targeting the still-recovering Waltz, she fired the Rabbot Laser at her leg.

"This is for what you had the Clock Men do to that hospital!" she cried as she took out Waltz's mobility.

E-123 Omega and Dangan Man both attempted to redefine 'bullet hell' as they dueled each other.

"It's awesome!" Sonic exclaimed as he bounced off the shield of a Sniper Joe, knocking the green robot prone. "They bond with those

they like and give them these wicked cool powers!"

"That sounds great!" Rock grinned, running past the downed robot. "It's a deal then!"

Big smiled to himself as he caught a big fish that was trying to hurt his friends. Shark Man just thrashed and cursed from where he was bound tight by the extra-tough fishing line.

Waltz desperately tried to fire back, but Roll turned red and brown for the coyote guard Antoine D'Coolette. Former unintentional laughingstock turned noble romantic and master swordsman.

The Trick Sword flashed out, deflecting the shots from Waltz's remaining finger cannons, one of which was reflected back into Waltz's eye.

"And you can consider *that* for sending Compass Man to massacre the police!"

Charge Man's face met Mighty's fist in a head-on collision.

A gate in the style that Rock was exceedingly familiar with stood in front of the true blue heroes. Upon it was the left half of the self-styled symbol of Dr. Eggman and the right half of Dr. Wily's skull emblem, a lightning bolt dividing the two as well as uniting them in a single icon.

"I take it this is the place?" Sonic asked rhetorically.

"Oh, yeah," Rock replied as the two approached. "I've seen enough of these doors to last me *several* lifetimes."

The gate slid up, revealing a pitch black room beyond.

Rotor grunted as he held on tight to Frost Man and tried to sabotage the giant robot's systems.

"And this," Roll stated to her recovering opponent as her colors turned red and black with yellow trim, the colors of Omega. The little bird in a robot who understood and respected the value of life and peace, but still could not help but see inherent beauty in acts of destruction. "This is for the little girl whose family you murdered in front of her."

The Omega Gatling punctuated the statement repeatedly as Roll fired it into Waltz's face and upper torso.

"M-m-m-mercy!" The decimated Waltz sputtered and sparked.

KA-CHUNK

The sudden light blinded Rock and Sonic, but the sight it revealed was not what either of them were expecting.

"Teleporters?" Rock puzzled over the sight of teleporter units ringing the room. Twenty-two in all, with an inactive one in the center. *'This isn't what's supposed to be here...'*

"Where's Metal Sonic and that Bass guy?" Sonic scratched his head.

"Not here," replied the voice of Sonic, but from one of the teleporters instead of the hedgehog himself.

Each of the other teleporters flared with light until replicas of the roboticized masters plus one extra stood before them.

"You'll have to settle for the Paradox Masters instead," Sonic's own double declared.

Dr. Light stood back to back with his eldest son, each fighting off the army of robot masters with their respective arm cannons. His son's built-in and his own hastily pieced together.

There were times when he despaired of ever reconciling with his eldest child, but he had two beacons of hope: The shades and the scarf.

The original scarf had been damaged beyond repair in the battle with Ra Moon, but it had been a gift from Dr. Light to his son when the boy spotted it in a window and asked if he could have it. He'd loved that scarf and had worn it everywhere, even to the ill-fated test run for the military. That he'd replaced it as quickly as possible told Dr. Light that he valued what it stood for.

The shades had been a similar gift, given to Blues on a day out when the sunlight had been a bit brighter than his experimental ocular sensors could tolerate. Blues had so loved those that he'd *insisted* on a shaded Sit-Rep visor for his helmet. The doctor had no idea what had happened to those original shades, but the fact that his son still insisted on wearing a pair told him the same thing as the scarf.

If his son needed time to sort out his feelings, Dr. Light would give it to him. He'd give his son all the time he needed.

Sonic looked at the gathered robotic versions of his friends and allies that surrounded him and Rock. He glared at the one of himself in particular.

'Paradox clones,' he groaned mentally. He'd been hoping that particular Skaia staple had been derailed with the oddities pervading this place. It seemed there wasn't going to be any such luck. *'Paradox* robo *-clones at that. As if I didn't have enough headaches to deal with right now.'*

At least the place didn't seem capable of paradox-cloning robots. Probably because they didn't have any DNA to clone with.

"They're not roboticized," Rock told him, the Sit-Rep shades sliding back up into his helmet. "They're just robot replicas with barely decent AIs."

"Good," Sonic growled. "Because I've had just about *enough* of this. SPEED BREAK!"

Sonic vanished in a blur, zig-zagging around the room and cutting through all twenty-two robots in the space of a few seconds before reappearing next to Rock and falling to his knees.

"You okay?" Rock asked, wide-eyed.

"I'll be fine," Sonic waved him off. "Just a little light-headed. Memo to file: Speed Break is *not* meant for cornering more than ninety degrees."

"I can imagine," Rock helped the hedgehog to his feet.

"I'll bet you can," a new voice interjected from the middle of the room.

Roll stared at the insane robot, who seemed just as surprised as she was with the plea for mercy. Waltz. The unrepentant killer who Roll would have sworn didn't even possess the word in her vocabulary.

And yet...

"Alright," Roll agreed as she turned her buster back into a hand and powered down her weapons. Rock had always believed in giving his enemies a chance to reform. Even those who had done terrible things or maliciously hurt others. And even though she'd suffered so much pain and trauma across multiple lifetimes, it was an attitude

she couldn't find fault with. The drive to save everyone was as much hers as it was her brothers'.

Even if that someone was Waltz.

"I s-s-sup-pose this i-i-is for-r-r-r you-u, rig-ght?" Waltz giggled and sparked, trying to regain some sense of superiority in the situation. Roll moved to stand over her and perform some quick maintenance to ensure Waltz didn't shut down after asking for mercy. "Got-t-t-t-ta mak-k-ke yours-s-self fe-e-e-el bet-t-ter-r? Sh-sh-how m-me how-w much-ch-h I-I-I'm n-not a t-t-th-hreat?"

It was a kindness Waltz found she couldn't stand. "YO-OUR MISTA-A-AKE!" she yelled and lunged her one good hand in a final effort to kill Roll by shooting her through the head.

"No," Roll disagreed as she casually caught Waltz's one working hand in hers. An instant later Waltz's five remaining finger cannons had been crushed, leaving the insane robot weaponless. "This is for you. Because for all your madness and all the misery and pain you've wrought, you never had another choice. Whatever screw-up Wily made when programming you left you unable to take another path in life. You are the one who suffers for another's mistake."

"THE-3-e-ERE IS-s-$-S NO-o-0-O MI-!-I-i-ISTAKE!" Waltz screamed and shorted. "I A- -AM W-w-\/\/-WHO I-i-1-!-I SHOUL-l-LD-d-|)-d-D BE!"

"I don't think you're who anyone should be," Roll retorted as she patched the shorts and sparks. That would hold Waltz together until she got back. If she got back. "Not without being able to choose for themselves."

"I'LL NEVER CHOOSE ANYTHING ELSE!" Waltz screamed after her, her shattered body prone and helpless. "I EXIST TO SPREAD PAIN AND SUFFERING! IT'S POINTLESS TO TRY!"

"Well," Roll threw back over her shoulder with a sad smile, "we're in the Loops now. I have eternity to find out for sure."

"I'LL BRING ALL OF REALITY CRASHING DOWN FIRST!" Waltz screamed, barely coherent. "DO YOU HEAR ME?! YOU'LL NEVER REFORM ME AND YOU'LL NEVER BE RID OF ME!"

But Roll was already dashing down the corridor in the direction her brother had gone and paid her former opponent no more mind.

'I'm coming, brother.'

The light of the formerly inactive central teleporter died down, revealing the very robots the two heroes had been expecting in the first place: Bass, Treble, and Metal Sonic.

"I've *really* been looking forward to this!" Bass grinned as he led the charge.

The two doctors alternated between finishing up their joint war machine and sniping each other with thinly veiled antagonistic remarks as the walls of the Wily Egg reverberated with the sounds of battle between Duo and the Chaos Devil.

Rock wasn't having an easy time of things against Bass and Treble. Bass's general arrogance when he felt he was in control of a situation made it all too easy to forget how dangerous an opponent Wily's 'black prince' (21) could be when he dropped all pretenses and fought seriously.

Behind him, he heard the crash Sonic made when his own opponent managed to catch the hedgehog off guard in the middle of gloating.

Most of the Wily's altered timeline from the 'Genesis Wave' Sonic had told him of was pretty minor, the biggest difference being the

presence of the Constellation Droids on Earth rather than... wherever it was they were from originally. But Bass... Wily had clearly gone above and beyond when altering Bass's life.

For one, Bass's rapid fire upgrade that he was pinning Rock down with hadn't been developed for him until right before the incident with King. The event that was the start of Bass's move from working with Wily to kinda-sorta working with the Light siblings. But that hadn't happened in the new timeline, and Bass had remained completely loyal to Dr. Wily.

"Stop hiding and *fight me!* Coward!" Bass yelled as he continued to unleash a continuous rain of buster fire.

What *also* hadn't happened was Bass's fight with Roll, and apparently his resulting crush on Rock's sister. Bass wasn't a time cloned servant of Wily, he was Wily's own son with a newly rewritten past and memories courtesy of his father.

And all the more dangerous for it.

Rock cut off his reflections and ducked a pouncing strike from Treble and turned to fire on the robotic wolf.

"Maybe if you stop sending Treble to do your dirty work!" Rock shouted back as Treble yelped in pain, knowing exactly the kind of reaction this was going to produce. After all, he tended to act the same way when it was Rush being hurt.

" *DON'T TOUCH MY DOG!* " Bass roared as he leapt down, charging his buster at the same time.

Rock jumped to the side of the charged shot as it melted through one of the steel boxes littering the chamber, and heard Sonic shout in pain as the hedgehog was clipped by the thermal backwash of the blast.

"You okay, Sonic?" Rock asked while taking in the situation. Odd. Bass was checking on Treble rather than pressing the attack, which was to be expected, but Metal Sonic just seemed to be hanging there for no apparent reason.

"Little crispy, but I'll be fine," Sonic replied, a few of his quills smoldering. "Whaddya say we mix it up a bit and take each other's usual dance partners? See if that makes this go a bit faster."

Rock had a feeling, or maybe a partially restored memory, that it wasn't going to go like that, but he was game to try if Sonic was.

Duo was no longer sure exactly where in the battlestation he was, and he really didn't much care. The mechanical ruin all around him and his opponent made it rather difficult to tell in any case.

Sonic's baseline memories may be rusty, but he was pretty sure he knew how to handle this chump.

Zig-zag around his rapid-fire energy blasts at high speed, pointedly not think about what would happen if this dude and Omega ever got together, perform a sweet Time Break slide under a pouncing robo-wolf, pop up and–

"– *OOF!* "

'Run gut-first into this guy's power kick,' Sonic mentally griped as he flew back in an explosion of rings. *'Thank you, rusty baseline memories.'*

Dr. Light and Blues whipped around as one to fire behind the other's back at advancing opponents.

As soon as Rock had moved to challenge Metal Sonic, the robot hedgehog had begun racing around the circular wall of the chamber at incredible speeds. Clearly the room had been designed to allow exactly this for the mechanical double of Sonic quickly accelerated to speeds that Rock couldn't properly track or target.

But he knew that his opponent eventually had to break the pattern and that would be when he would strike with the shot he was now charging. Almost as if his thoughts triggered the reaction, Metal Sonic broke from his path to fly at Rock.

" *Gotcha!* " Rock declared as he fired straight at his oncoming opponent. And an instant later, he got a flash of what was about to happen and began moving to counter.

Metal Sonic powered through the shot encased in an eight-sided dark energy diamond-shaped barrier and reached out for Rock's face with his metal hands.

" *Gah!* " Rock couldn't dodge the speedy assault, but neither could Metal Sonic avoid the counter-kick Rock had begun. Both combatants tumbled, with Metal Sonic managing to arrest his movement and Rock continuing on into a metal crate with enough force to crack it in time for Sonic to dive behind the crate for cover from Bass's buster fire.

"Okay, the switching opponents idea was my bad," Sonic huffed and puffed, next to where Rock was kneeling.

Rock took a moment to give thanks for overconfident opponents as Bass ceased firing and, by the sound of his footfalls, simply walked up from behind where he and Sonic were while Metal Sonic simply hovered stoically in place ahead of them. "What's up with the rings?" he asked while thinking on options. "I didn't see you drop any on the way here."

"Eh, they have a weird tendency to pop out of subspace pockets when whoever has them takes a hit," Sonic admitted. "I'm usually

focused enough to hang on to them anyway, but your boy Bass blindsided me with a good one. I still think Hermes is somehow responsible for them doing that though."

Hermes took offense at the look Hephaestus was giving him. "What? I'm not! I swear! The things naturally form their own subspace pocket when collected and eject from it to save the holder from harm! Honest! It's not my fault Sonic and his friends used that as a base to form their own subspace pockets! Why won't anyone believe me on this?!"

"The girls back at the nurse school made a list," one of the nymphs piped up cheerfully as she walked in from the outer office. "You wanna see it?"

"If you could forward it over after this is finished, I'd appreciate it," Hephaestus grinned, going back to analyzing the genesis chamber's code.

"Oh," the nymph continued a little nervously, "the valkyries wanted you to know that if you don't come up with a better solution for..." she paused for a moment and checked the room over before deciding to be cautious anyway, "...mistress Aphrodite's, ah, messages than rerouting them to the outer office once you're done with the current problem then they'll, er, take action against the source."

"I'll help them pick out weapons," Hephaestus replied darkly.

" *No* ," Hermes admonished forcefully. "Accessory to deicide is *not* the answer! I know you can upgrade your spam filter as soon as the situation stabilizes so there's no need to do something drastic."

"Killjoy," Hephaestus grumped.

"How many rings do you have?" Rock asked as a plan formed.

"Dunno," Sonic shrugged. "I stopped keeping track a long time ago. I just know that every billionth one comes mounted on its own plaque for some reason. So, double team one at a time I take it? We did your guy first last time if I recall, so let's go with mine this time."

"There was a reason we did Bass first," Rock argued.

"Fine," Sonic huffed. "Rock, paper, scissors."

As one, the two both threw scissors, and then paper. Sonic grinned as he recalled what was about to happen and realized that Rock didn't remember the exact outcome. Rock was gonna throw rock, so all he had to do was throw pa–

Scissors.

–per?

Sonic stared at where he'd thrown scissors against his friend's rock. "Nertz," he swore. "Fine."

"And you wonder why we believe you'd sabotage a subspace pocket for laughs," Hephaestus teased Hermes.

"Hey," Hermes defended himself. "Rock has the right idea and it's a path we already know leads to success. Perfectly good reason to slip Sonic a subconscious suggestion message and influence his reflexes."

"Right, you keep telling yourself that."

"Cover me!" Sonic called as they both dove out of the way of Metal Sonic and let the robotic hedgehog embed himself in the metal crate behind them.

Bass opened fire on both of them and Rock began returning it as Sonic revved up a Spin Dash and sped past the black-armored robot and into his canine support unit. That got Bass's attention and Sonic ricocheted off of several crates and towards his and Rock's joint opponent.

Roll swore to herself as she battled her way past a small army of various Joe units with her broom-staff. Rock and Sonic had obviously already been this way from evidence she'd seen earlier but of *course* they couldn't clean up after themselves!

Rock turned black and red as he called upon the weapon of Shadow, the brash and arrogant rival of Sonic and dark defender of their world. Should he and Bass ever meet they'd either be fast friends or flat out try to kill each other.

"CHAOS CANNON!" Rock yelled out as Bass casually backhanded Sonic's Homing Attack out of the air.

As focused as he was on the hedgehog, Bass failed to dodge and was frozen in place by the weaponized temporal distortion. Sonic took quick advantage and Bass cried out in pain as Treble leapt for Rock.

Turning teal and white, helmet colors reversed, Rock channeled the echo of Silver, the psychokinetic displaced from his own time and, prior to the Loops, working to ensure the safety of his future era by aiding the heroes of the past.

Treble yelped as the Psycho Burst encased him and shoved him across the room while Bass single-mindedly continued to fire on Sonic. Rock turned to his rival and fired on him while he was distracted.

"Time to drop the Bass!" Sonic grinned as said robot was lifted into the air by the borrowed psychic power Rock was using. Leaping up

after him, Sonic then drove Bass back into the ground with a Homing Attack.

Off to the side, Metal Sonic finished extracting himself from the crate he'd gotten stuck in and flew at Rock at the same time Treble charged from the other side.

Rock immediately shifted to purple and black for the honorable Chaotix ninja Espio and engaged the Chroma Camo. He backstepped out of the path of both assailants and winced as they crashed face first into each other. Not even missing a beat, he turned the green and lime of the music loving brawler-turned-detective leader of the Chaotix, Vector, and fired the Acoustic Blaster as he shouted a warning to Sonic.

Thanks to the warning, Sonic sidestepped the shot and gave Rock a thumbs up as Bass was hit right in the face with the sound-based weapon. Taking the opening, Sonic kicked Bass back towards Rock who had changed to red and pink as he called up the chosen weapon of Amy, dedicated friend and defender as well as Sonic's occasionally disturbing stalker/paramour, and smashed Bass's head into the ground with the Piko Hammer.

PIKO!

Shade had joined up with Ray and Beat at some point with Rush and Tango in tow. She'd often been somewhat puzzled by the flying squirrel's insistence that he wasn't a useful asset to his team or allies. From where she stood, the boy was at least as skilled in martial combat as many of her former clan and was an asset that any group would be proud to claim. Yet he constantly claimed inferiority. Sure, most of his peers were loopers with many lifetimes of experience over him, but the boy seemed to think that he was the weakest of their extended group even in the baseline.

Not that such was really helping one way or the other. Loopers or not, experienced warriors or otherwise, they were all beginning to

tire. The robot masters were coming that little bit closer, doing just a touch more damage with their efforts. And her allies were beginning to group together in an effort to find some respite against the endless onslaught. Bigger assaults in response would either drain them faster or leave them open to counterattack. And still make no overall dent in the number of the enemy.

What they needed was reinforcements.

"Bass is down!" Rock declared as he switched weapons again and took aim at Metal Sonic.

"Keep up the pressure!" Sonic reminded him redundantly as he raced towards his usual foe.

Rock's colors of orange and white denoted the power of Tails, the high-flying young fox genius and Sonic's longest standing friend and ally. He unleashed the Tail Wind upon the recovering Metal Sonic as Treble, sparking from one of his hind legs, barked fruitlessly at him.

Sonic came up behind his robotic double as he was hit and drove both feet into the robot's back, driving him into the ground and riding him across the floor like a skateboard.

"This is your stop!" Sonic called to his foe, hopping off as a red and white Rock; flush with the favored weapon of Knuckles, the eternal and sometimes lonely guardian of the floating island; drove the Spiked Knuckle into the back of Metal Sonic's head.

Except that Metal Sonic had apparently had enough, and rose into the air with an aura of energy that Sonic recognized as the V. Maximum Overdrive Attack and drove himself straight into Rock's torso. Sonic raced after the two as they rocketed across the chamber and through a metal crate or two before the overdrive cut out.

Rock was ready when it happened and switched to the black and yellow of the Rapid Stinger. Flipping around in an acrobatic

maneuver as Metal Sonic flew by, he could feel the echo of Charmy, the childish member of the Chaotix, give Metal Sonic a raspberry even as the needles peppered the malicious robot repeatedly.

Sonic raced past the bouncing Rock and drove a Spin Dash into his robotic rival as hard as he could.

Bass growled impotently where he lay, until Treble manage to limp over carrying a pair of E-Tanks Dr. Wily had given the wolf 'just in case'.

'Alright, pops,' Bass thought to himself as he popped one of the cans for Treble and the other for himself and began drinking, *'just this once I'll accept your help in beating Mega Man.'*

"I think Metal Sonic's down for the count," Sonic spoke up as he finished his post-impact skid, seeing the sparking form of his robot double try and fail to stand.

Rock switched back to his default Mega Buster at the announcement. "And Bass is–"

"–JUST GETTING STARTED!" said robot called out from where he was just finishing his fusion with Treble. Immediately, Bass in his super adapter form flapped his wings and flew into the air where he fired a charged shot upwards. That shot hit something in the ceiling which absorbed it and began raining down refracted energy bursts.

" *Holy!* " Sonic yelped, frantically dodging the energy rain.

Weaving through the bolts from long experience, Rock changed weapons again. This time to the white and black with pink trim that represented Rouge, the part-time secret agent and part-time jewel obsessed master thief. Firing the Black Wave at Bass scored a hit and caused Wily's dark enforcer to seize up as the stunning properties of the weapon coursed over his systems.

Unfortunately, both Rock and Sonic took lucky blows from the energy rain and it looked like Bass was going to recover from his stunned state before they could take advantage of it when the gate to the chamber opened and a yellow figure dashed in.

Bass strained against the shorts in his system that Mega Man's weapon had produced, determined to break free and take out his opponents before they got back to their feet. As he regained mobility, he laughed.

"This is it, Mega Man!" he yelled as he charged up for another blast. "I've finally won! There's no way you can dodge this!"

"Hey, Bass!" a female voice interrupted him. Turning, Bass saw Mega Woman leaping for him with her ridiculous broom weapon. "SHUT!"

The female robot swung with all her might before Bass could retarget his buster and crac–

I think I'm in...

–ked him hard on his chin, whipping his head back and making him lose control of his flight.

" *UP!* "

Rock couldn't believe their good fortune. Roll had arrived in the nick of time and used her broom-staff to knock Bass out of the air. She was wailing on him, driving him across the room without letting up and allowing him and Sonic to get to their feet.

"Rock," Sonic grinned as he revved up to charge into battle and help their mutual savior, "I said it before, but it's worth repeating: Your sister is officially awesome."

"Preaching to the choir," Rock told him as he switched to the weapon of Blaze; the refined, level headed, and at times strict ruler and pyrokinetic of a dimension parallel to Sonic's; turning violet and white.

As one of Roll's strikes knocked Bass back further than the others, Sonic took full advantage and hit the currently winged robot full in the torso with a Spin Dash. With Bass knocked even further back, Rock had a clear shot for the Fire Tornado and took it with extreme prejudice.

When it was over, the smoldering form of Bass combined with Treble fell to the ground.

"Now, Albert?" Dr. Eggman asked impatiently. Their machine was finished, so what *was* he waiting for?

"Not yet, Ivo," Dr. Wily calmly observed the events in the room on his monitor.

As the trio of heroes were celebrating, a torrent of what looked like metallic parchment fell from above. All three dodged, only to find that they weren't the targets. Instead, the 'metal paper' wrapped around Bass and Metal Sonic and retracted towards a new figure where it unwrapped and set them down gently.

The new figure was a red-eyed robot with parchment colored armor over a black body.

"Is it just me, or does this guy's armor look like folded paper?" Sonic jerked his thumb in the direction of the newcomer.

"I am Origami Man," the robot declared. (22)

"Now."

The wall behind the three exploded before any further action could be taken by or against Origami Man. A massive beam of energy erupted forth and struck Sonic head on, knocking him out and resulting in a deluge of rings erupting from the point of impact. Rock and Roll managed to catch a glimpse of a skull-shaped head on the robot with gray horns reminiscent of Wily's hairstyle and a metal orange mustache clearly meant to represent Eggman.

However, the glut of rings that fell around them prevented them from defending themselves as a pair of giant spiked rocket fists slammed fully into them. The spikes were far enough apart that they only took the blunt force of the impact, but they were still rendered as unconscious as Sonic had been.

The Freedom Fighters had grouped back together and were covering for each other as they fell back towards Dr. Light. Across the battlefield others were grouping together and doing the same.

The suggestion had been brought up by a few to break out weapons or techniques capable of widespread destruction to deal with the army of robot masters, but Sally and others had backed up Sonic's request not to. The mad doctors had apparently destroyed a pair of city-moons and their respective armies and fleets, and the army of robot masters alone was nowhere *near* capable of such a feat. The possible reasons for holding something like that back made no sense, but then again, neither did much of what the doctors did. Unleashing larger firepower could entice the doctors to call forth whatever they might have in reserve.

"Cerebral download complete. Self-repairs at 90%."

Bass came to at the sound of Metal Sonic speaking from across the room. He opened his eyes and spotted his assigned 'partner' drop the head of one of the Paradox Masters that Mega Man and Sonic

had defeated before they'd been allowed to come in. The robotic hedgehog then began making his way towards another.

"I will surpass Sonic. I will surpass Eggman. I will surpass all," the robot stated as he picked up the head of Paradox Sonic and extended his clawed fingers into the cranium. "Cerebral download commencing. Self-repairs at 95%."

"Well," Bass grinned to himself. He hurt all over, but he was still fused with Treble and functioning. "Looks like we have a traitor in our midst."

"Yes," said Wily's paper-themed hobby robot next to him. "Action needs to be taken. Here, you will need this."

Bass almost considered slapping the S-Tank away, but the robot was right. Bass hated to admit weakness, but it hurt to move right now. And this opponent wasn't Mega Man, or his sis–

I think I'm in l...

–ter. He wasn't an honorable – where did that thought come from? – rival. He was a threat to the mission, his dad, and everything else. He was going down hard. So Bass took the S-Tank and drank it, as well as accepted the offered had from the robot master to get up.

He then copied the robot's master weapon and shot the weak piece of scrap in the head. Bass still had his pride after all. Plus Metal Sonic seemed to like hijacking robot brains for some reason, so best not to leave any lying about, right?

"Cerebral download complete," the metal hedgehog intoned as it dropped the final Paradox Master's head. "Self-repairs complete. Targeting unit Bass for elimination and download."

"Not gonna happen," Bass sneered at his newest enemy.

The three heroes had woken up in a trio of capsules bound by energy restraints. That they were still alive was a pleasant surprise, but not unexpected. If there was anything the doctors loved to do, it was gloat.

And gloat they did. Another common trait between the two was that they were long winded and loved to hear themselves talk. (23)

The combined allies of Sonic and Mega Man had all fallen back into a single group surrounded on all sides by their foes. Even Tails had transformed the Tornado into its ground walker mode and joined the rest. Powers, weapons fire, and explosives peppered the surrounding robot masters as the group attempted to keep them at bay.

"Don't worry doctor," Cream told the Light patriarch as she and Cheese helped him fend off the advancing army, "Sonic and the Mega Twins will save us!"

"Oh, I have faith that they'll save our *worlds* ," the scientist said as he used his knowledge of his own designs' weak points to disable Galaxy Man, "but right now *we* need a miracle."

As if something had been waiting for precisely that cue, the surrounding robot masters were bombarded with ice, scissor blades, explosives, fire, blobs of oil (some of which had been lit on fire), glowing energy arrows, and electricity.

"Mind if we cut in?" a voice drew the eyes of the allied group skyward.

"One miracle, coming right up!" declared Elec Man riding upon an Item-2 jet as he charged up for another shot of his Thunder Beam. Behind him, all on Item-2 jets, came Cut Man wielding a Rolling Cutter in each hand, Fire Man continuing to pour on the flames of his Fire Storm, Ice Man targeting for another Ice Slasher, Bomb Man throwing Hyper Bombs like they were going out of style, Guts Man

loosening up his massive arms, Oil Man striking a pose, and Time Man looking focused.

"So..." Knuckles addressed Dr. Light, "these robots friendly?"

"Yes!" Dr. Light replied enthusiastically. "Elec Man! You're a sight for sore eyes! How?"

"Dr. Lalinde put in the call after Mega Man and Mega Woman went through," Elec Man filled the doctor in as he landed, his brothers joining the rest of the forces in pressing back against the robot master army. "She was certain you'd need back-up, which seems to have been the right call. We followed Duo's trail to get here. How are Mega Man and Mega Woman doing?"

"Not well," Blues cut in. "Duo went in a while ago and we've gotten no sign since. Something's gone wrong." *'Just like last time,'* he thought to himself.

"Well, you're the robot scientist, right?" Knuckles asked. "Me and Proto-Guy can get you in there and you should be able to wreck whatever the doctors have in the works, right?"

"I'm coming too," Shadow interjected. "In case the doctors have any nasty surprises." ' *Not to mention if we save Sonic, he'll never live it down,'* he added silently.

"Sounds like a plan," Elec Man agreed, turning to Knuckles. "Here, you can use my Item-2."

"Works for me," Blues agreed as he whistled for the trio of support units. "Dr. Light will take Rush and Shadow can ride Tango. Beat? Board."

As Rush and Tango turned into their normal jet modes, Knuckles and Shadow raised an eyebrow as Beat turned into something resembling Extreme Gear.

"Little something I picked up from your friends," Blues grinned at them. (24)

"I have the victory," Metal Sonic declared from where he had driven Bass into the wall during their battle. That 'cerebral download' of his apparently allowed him to copy the master weapons of the downed Paradox Masters. And Bass mused that they didn't hurt any less from him than they did from Mega Man. "And soon your knowledge and abilities."

"Yeah? You want my powers?" Bass grinned as he grasped Metal Sonic's arm and activated his Copy Chip. "Well now *I've* got *yours* ." (25)

"What?" Metal Sonic expressed confusion as Bass's colors shifted. That ability wasn't in his data banks.

"Dad upgraded the super adapter so I can use master weapons with it," Bass's grin widened as Metal Sonic tried to disengage and failed due to Bass's death grip on him. "And it looks like you've got *three* . Let's try the 'joint matrix' first."

The Burst Shield that Metal Sonic used as his joint offensive and defensive matrix flared from his opponent and blasted him back. He quickly righted himself and unleashed the Fire Tornado back at Bass.

"And here's the defensive one!" Bass laughed as he used the Black Shield to power through the flames and tackle Metal Sonic head-on. Eggman's dubiously loyal enforcer activated his own Burst Shield to throw his opponent off of him.

"And my personal favorite!" Bass proclaimed with glee, ignoring the damage he'd taken and charged at Metal Sonic in full V. Maximum Overdrive mode. " *Pure offense!* "

Rock, Roll, and Sonic rolled their collective eyes as the doctors began arguing with each other over apparently withheld details of their evil plan.

"Can either of you move?" Sonic asked hopefully.

"Nope," Rock replied.

"Me either," Roll agreed.

"Well, drat," Sonic sighed.

Blues finally accepted his helmet back from Dr. Light as they approached a thin area in the Wily Egg's armor roughly where his siblings' locator signals pointed to them being. He almost said something to his father, but the words died in his throat. Now wasn't the time. Besides, with the way the Loops supposedly worked, nothing he said to the man would mean anything until he was Awake to remember it.

He almost believed himself.

Knuckles led the way and punched through the battlestation's armor, with Blues right behind him, buster blazing. "Someone order an extra large beatdown for two, heavy on the boom?" the echidna cracked.

"Blues! Knuckles!" the red raider heard his siblings cheer from where they were imprisoned as he and the echidna attacked the doctors.

"And Shadow," Sonic could be heard lamenting good naturedly as the dark hedgehog took guard of Dr. Light as they went over to free the captured heroes. "Man, I am *never* hearing the end of this."

"No, you aren't," Shadow's grin was audible as he and the doctor went to work on freeing the three.

" *No no no!* " Wily frantically interposed his saucer lid between himself and Blues's buster fire.

"To the Egg-Wily Machine X!" Eggman maneuvered his own personal craft away from Knuckles. "Hurr– *eeeeeek!* "

"I'll do better than that!" Wily declared as he pressed a button in his saucer. Near the ceiling of the chamber, a device whirred to life and began to take aim at the captive heroes.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 2%

"Damnit!" Hermes swore as he saw the device become active. "We were so focused on finding something Category 3 or worse that we overlooked the Category 4s the doctors brought with them!"

"What is it?" Hephaestus yelled back across the office as he began to analyze the code of the device. The moment it had activated, the success chance had hit 2% and stopped dropping. The number tickled the back of his awareness for some reason.

"It's Dr. Robotnik's Ultimate Annihilator modified for projectile assault!" Hermes shouted. " *It's a retcon-class weapon!* "

Hephaestus froze. Retcon-class weapons were perhaps the nastiest things mortals could get a hold of. They couldn't hit Yggdrasil's code directly; even the Anti-Monitor, arguably the biggest retcon-class threat in Yggdrasil's system, couldn't do that; but they could stop a target's code from running in the current reality and sometimes even wipe all traces of them from the reality that was running. For an active looper, it was only a bit more of an inconvenience than death was. Even damaged, Yggdrasil's built-in safeguards prevented such things from ever being worse than a high-tier category 4 threat, but with his Anchors not yet properly set in place, such an event was very high on the list of problems.

"TARTARUS!" Hermes swore. "He's going to fire on the captive Anchors! Yggdrasil's still locking out changes to the local reality and there's no one close or fast enough to stop it!"

Hephaestus noted that Blues had spotted the weapon and was moving to intercept. Too bad him being hit would be no different than his siblings being hit at this stage. Unless...

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 2%

It dawned on him why the success chance had stopped dropping and his fingers flew across his terminal as he slowed relative time in regards to himself to a crawl. He needed to do this at *exactly* the right moment. Too early and he'd lose the tertiary candidate, whether or not his trick worked. Too late and the tertiary candidate would be erased before his gamble could work and the entire Loop would collapse.

Blues flew directly between the unknown weapon and his family and raised his shield right as it fired.

Hephaestus pressed Enter. (26)

Reality itself *lurched* and both Rock and Roll stumbled under a sudden increase to an invisible burden they hadn't noticed before. Both of their eyes widened with unspoken alarm and they turned to look for their elder brother.

"BLUES!"

"The volt was that?" Elec Man blinked in confusion. The battle had paused after space itself had jolted like the Enterprise under enemy fire.

"Don't know," the squirrel that had introduced herself as Sally told him as the opposing army of robot masters began attacking again, "and we're a little too busy to go and find out."

"Right," Elec Man agreed as he unleashed his Thunder Beam on Cold Man and a few surrounding foes.

(Eiken commercial by WyldeHorse)*

A beautiful, scantily-clad blond woman stands on a street, with grey-toned buildings to either side while similarly grey-toned people performing various monotonous actions in the background.

"Is the cycling of the multiverse getting a bit repetitive? Are your loops full of stale old enemies and boring rivalries? Could you use something different in your endlessly repeating existence? Well, have I got something new for all of you! I'm Aphrodite, Yggdrasil Admin, and I have a completely different sort of loop for you!"

Aphrodite walks down a street, buildings and people gaining color and vigor as she does, and a high school comes into view. She stops in front of the front gates.

"In the loops set in Eiken, you don't have to worry! There aren't any villains here to ruin your day! You can set down your weapons, ease up on the magic, and just relax! In fact, to help you relax, this loop is limited- you won't have to worry about any fighting, because anything foreign to the loop is disabled! So just sit back, relax, and enjoy a quiet Loop here!"

The gate opens up, and Aphrodite enters, showing the front yard to be full of attractive young men and very, very busty young women in all sorts of poses and activities. The view pauses for a long moment on a group of the young women playing volleyball to watch the bouncing occurring.

"In fact, it's more than just a chance to relax- it's a chance to have a bit of fun, too. There are all these lovely young ladies and gentlemen, just waiting to make your acquaintance! They'd love nothing more than to get to know you, and to help out with that, there's openings in clubs to help you fit right in. Don't worry- they'll all love to have you!"

She finally next to a window, and the view pans so the window fills the whole screen, showing a classroom full of even more impossibly chest-heavy young women, these all posing in front of the camera.

Aphrodite's voice is heard one last time, this time very softly and speaking very very quickly. "Yggdrasil is not repeat not liable for any back pain, paranoia or inappropriate groping or other adult-rated activities or psychological damages appertaining thereunto that occur in loops that take place in Eiken!"

****(End Commercial)****

Brynhildr turned to her fellow valkyries. "Sword or spear?" Honestly, did Aphrodite not have any actual *work* to do? (27)

"Depends, do we want to gut her or roast her on a spit?" Herfjötur glared at the latest piece of garbage Hephaestus's bitch of a wife had sent over the office mail accounts that they'd been forced to at least listen to. This would *not* go unpunished.

"Both of them are too quick. I vote we chuck her in Valhalla's drunk tank overnight. And leave her for a few weeks," Eir carefully tallied the items against the Olympian love goddess for later retribution. Heck, with this obscene misuse of office resources they could probably get Tyr to put some pressure on Zeus to allow something really creative. The head Olympian's skill for throwing others under metaphorical buses to save his own skin might actually prove useful for once.

"CHAOS IMPACT!" Shadow yelled as he unleashed his power on the unknown weapon, crushing it utterly. The sudden inexplicable surge of panic he'd gotten right after the doctors revealed the thing subsided as he did. He'd been too late to keep it from firing initially, but the thing certainly wasn't going to get a second.

He'd seen Blues move to intercept the shot and hoped he was alright. Especially after reality shook like that. That couldn't be a good sign for the state of the Loop.

Further musings were cut off as he Chaos Controlled over to help Knuckles with the Egg-Wily Machine X.

" *Launch already!* " the two doctors yelled at each other from their separate cockpits behind each eye of their machine as they frantically finished rebooting their war machine.

The Egg-Wily Machine X rocked under the missile assault the dark hedgehog launched from the weapon he'd suddenly gotten from... somewhere before he dismissed it and launched a sphere of pure chaos energy at them.

"CHAOS BALL!"

The doctors began arguing over how much chaos energy they should be drawing from the genesis chamber to power the machine before it disrupted the charging Super Genesis Wave, when Knuckles landed directly on the machine. Apparently he'd given up his Item-2 ride to Shadow at some point so he could get up close and personal while the dark hedgehog supported from range.

"You two ready to throw in the towel, or do I have to come in there and make you?" the guardian of the floating island cocked his fist back threateningly.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Wily cackled as he pressed a button on his console, "but we're fresh out of towels! How about fifty thousand volts of

protective shielding?!"

Wily bilinked and pressed the button again when nothing happened.

Told you so.

"Ivo..." Dr. Wily began dangerously. "Why are my defenses offline?"

"Nothing personal, Albert," Dr. Eggman grinned from his cockpit as he operated his own console. "But I'm afraid you were starting to hold back the operation. He's all yours Knuckles. As for you, Shadow, how about a face full of death las–eh?"

Metal Sonic had proved too fast to catch with the V Maximum Overdrive, so Bass had instead redirected his charge upwards. At the energy refractor his father had installed in the chamber's ceiling. The results didn't disappoint.

Energy beams fell thick and fast around the chamber, hitting nearly everything not directly under the center of the device like Bass himself was. Except Metal Sonic seemed to be avoiding the worst of it.

When the rain began to let up, the mechanical hedgehog swerved sharply towards his hovering opponent and blasted him with one of the Paradox Masters' ranged weapons and then tried to tackle him to the ground. Bass responded with a bicycle kick that launched his opponent halfway across the room before he managed to arrest his momentum in midair.

"Futile," Metal Sonic declared. "Your skill with my abilities is lacking."

"Well," Bass said, switching to the brand new Paper Folding weapon he'd gotten from his dad's hobby robot, "let's try a Wily original then!"

Metal Sonic raised his Black Shield as the parchment-like weapon snaked its way towards him.

'Just as planned,' Bass smirked as the weapon wrapped his foe up, shield and all, with a nice firm tether to boot. Hefting, Bass swung the wrapped-up robot and shield towards the ground, hitting just after Metal Sonic dropped the Black Shield in hopes of escaping.

And then the wrappings burst in a flash of energy as Metal Sonic rose high out of the impact site on his own V Maximum Overdrive aura and dove down towards Bass. The son of Wily grunted from impact as he was driven towards the ground, through a metal crate, and began to carve a furrow in the floor.

Bass grunted as his systems blared damage reports before his hand reflexively grabbed something right as Metal Sonic began to run out of steam. Sparing a glance at the object, and some mild surprise that Ro–

I think I'm in lo...

–ll had somehow dropped her attack broom, Bass performed an acrobatic recovery as he and his foe tumbled across the floor and swung the weapon into Metal Sonic's head with all his might. Metal Sonic careened even faster across the floor and impacted the wall hard enough to crack it.

The robotic hedgehog managed to lift his head just in time to see Bass's foot approaching before it crashed into, and through, his torso.

In another chamber of the Wily Egg, a capsule lit up.

UPLOADING...

UNAUTHORIZED DATA DETECTED.

PURGING UNAUTHORIZED DATA AS PER EGGMAN PROTOCOL.

DATA PURGE CANCELED AS PER UPDATED WILY PROTOCOL.

METAL SONIC UPLOAD COMPLETE.

"Heh," Bass chuckled as he stood over the remains of his opponent. He disengaged from Treble and found he was damaged enough to need to lean on the canine for support. "Thanks Treble."

The wolf robot barked sympathetically as a few of his own systems sparked from damage. Bass trusted few things in life, but Treble was unquestionably at the top of that short list.

"Yeah, we're gonna need some decent repair after all this boy," Bass patted his companion and examined the broom weapon he still held. He'd never ridicule Roll's choice of weapon again. Not after getting smacked around like that earlier, and certainly not after seeing what it let him do to his latest adversary. She was... quite the woman. "Heh. I think I'm in–"

I think I'm in love...

Bass clutched his head as he collapsed under the sudden onslaught of memories, Treble barking furiously in worry.

Rush and Tango brought a worried Light family, along with Sonic, down to the floor of the chamber just as Beat finished setting down an unconscious Blues.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Roll asked worriedly as her father examined the red raider.

"I think so," Dr. Light worried. "His systems look fine, but I have no idea what he was hit with in the first place."

"Sonic?" Rock turned to the blue blur. "Do you...?"

"Rock, buddy," Sonic informed the blue bomber gravely, "your brother just blocked what looked like the Ultimate Annihilator in laser

mode. I've been on the wrong end of that kind of device before and it ended those particular Loops *real* fast. Your bro's lucky he still *exists* in this iteration."

"I..." Dr. Light continued to look his eldest son over as best he could. "I don't know what to do. Even if we can get to the device before the doctors activate it, I have no way of being certain I could shut it down. And I think it may already be in the process of activating anyway..."

"Chill, doc," Sonic told him. "Even if we can't take the device out, I've got a sweet idea that'll take care of everything."

Dr. Light mulled those thoughts over before becoming all business. "I'll trust your judgement. Rock? Roll? I'm afraid I don't have any E-Tanks, but your super adapters with Rush and Tango should give you enough energy to continue fighting. I'll stay here and do what I can for Blues. You go with Sonic and save our worlds."

"Right," the Light twins replied as they began the process of combining with their support units.

Hephaestus continued to get his divine heart rate back under control as he slumped back in his chair. His gambit had worked. Barely, but it had worked.

PRIMARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE ROCK LIGHT SETTING AS JOINT ANCHOR IN DUAL ANCHOR CONFIGURATION FINALIZED.

SECONDARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE ROLL LIGHT SETTING AS JOINT ANCHOR IN DUAL ANCHOR CONFIGURATION FINALIZED.

TERTIARY ANCHOR CANDIDATE BLUES LIGHT DOWNGRADE TO STANDARD LOOPING STATUS SUCCESSFUL.

WARNING: DAMAGE TO HOME REALITY SETTINGS FOR LOOPER BLUES LIGHT. LOOPER MAY NOT LOAD IN CORRECT

LOCATION.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 80%

"I can't believe what I just saw happen," Hermes stared at him in awe. "You waited until the retcon effect started to erase his presence from the current iteration, and then you initiated your 'one-time downgrade to normal looper' so that Yggdrasil would adjust his code before it finished, essentially *re-loading him into the Loop before he was completely removed from it* . And even if that didn't work, upgrading Roll to joint Anchor status with her brother and adjusting them to a standard dual Anchor configuration pretty much saved the whole attempt."

" *I* can't believe it and I *coded* it," Hephaestus moaned. "I hope that's the last big curve ball this activation attempt's going to throw at us, because I *surely* just went over my miracle quota."

" *You* sabotaged *me?!* " Eggman yelled at the other cockpit as Knuckles began to crack the armor with his punches.

"Off course, Ivo," Wily replied as he ignored Knuckles's pounding on the exterior and the cracking of the armor and fiddled with some wiring. "Now check your readout while I exchange these relays and fix the confusion in the 'Battle' and 'Chase' programs."

Eggman did so, and was alarmed at what he saw. "YOU PUT THE ULTIMATE ANNIHILATOR IN MY COCKPIT?!"

"Yes," Wily declared as he finished up. "I am not as weak as you think Ivo. I tolerated Thomas because while he has stolen adulation, credit, and respect due me, he has never once outright betrayed me. Not like you. Goodbye my friend."

Eggman was silent for a moment, and then he began to laugh. He'd finally lost the game. The game he played with every single commander in his Eggman army back home. The game of deceit

and betrayal that kept maintaining his rule over the parts of the world he controlled interesting. And he'd lost to Albert, the first genuine peer he'd ever found. The sole man who could match and understand his genius.

His one true equal.

'How appropriate!' Eggman continued to roar with laughter as the energy of the Ultimate Annihilator permeated his half of the cockpit. *'I finally lose the game to my only real frie–'*

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 60%

"You were saying?"

Hephaestus swoaned (28) as he saw what his companion was talking about.

Orbot and Cubot stared in total silence at the spot where Eggman had just... been erased from existence. Even Knuckles and Shadow had stopped trying to attack the war machine in shock.

"Boss..." Orbot lamented.

"Oh, ain't we in trouble now!" Cubot managed to drawl in panic. "These here systems need two operators, don't they?"

"Oh my, yes!" Orbot agreed. "The Egg-Wily Machine X cannot function at full capacity without both doctors!"

"Bad luck for you, Wily," Knuckles growled as he prepared to crack open the machine's cranium armor liek an eggshell.

"Ah, but I prepared for everything!" Wily retorted. "Backup driver teleport system engaged. Full system restore – *NOW!* "

The eyes of the machine flashed blue while the rest of it flared with a bright yellow energy that threw Knuckles off towards Shadow and the Item-2 jet he currently rode.

"Damni–what?" Shadow began to curse, only to cut himself off in shock at what he saw in the cockpits. Dr. Wily was in one like before, but in the other...

"Boss?" Orbot questioned in surprise.

"We thoughtcha was erased or somethin'!" Cubot added.

...was Dr. Eggman. Like nothing had happened.

"Hohohohoho!" the new Eggman laughed. "Paradox Eggman reporting for duty Albert!"

"Great to have you, Ivo!" Wily replied cheerfully, seeming to be completely unaffected by what he'd just done. "Shall we?"

"Of course! Self-repair systems running at 251%!" Paradox Eggman cheered. "We're invincible!"

"SUPER GENESIS WAVE ACTIVATED" a computerized voice echoed across the room.

"Hah!" Wily exulted. "Checkmate!"

WARNING: EVENT DESIGNATED 'SUPER GENESIS WAVE' GENERATED BY LOCAL ARTIFACTS DESIGNATED 'CHAOS EMERALDS' CORRUPTED BY INTERACTION WITH SKAIA PROTOCOL.

CATEGORY 1 EVENT COMPARISON: 7% MATCH.

TOTAL CATEGORY 1 EVENT MATCH WITH SKAIA: 27%

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 50%

Duo clenched the cracked and battered control eye of the Chaos Devil in his giant hand as his opponent reformed into what Duo could tell was his untainted body. He'd have loved to meet and greet what was clearly a guardian of purity like himself, but he could feel something very wrong happening.

He would have rushed to help, but his place was administering Justice. Putting a reality in the process of breaking back together was both outside his job description and beyond his abilities.

"Damnit!" Hephaestus swore as he and Hermes were again denied from making changes to the Loop. Skaia's influence on the Super Genesis Wave was causing it to react poorly to the established code in the branches. Data corruption in the two Loops was already happening and if this wasn't stopped, they could lose *both* of them. "There's a category 2 event *in progress* and Yggdrasil still won't give us the access needed to stop it!"

Hermes was quiet for a moment. "What if we used the loopers?"

The forge god turned to look at his companion for this endeavor.

"Yggdrasil might not be letting *us* do anything," the god of travel continued as his fingers flew across his terminal, "but *they* don't have any such restrictions."

Use the Time Stones. All of them. Full power.

Silver started in confusion as the thought crossed his mind. Hermes had warned him not to use the full power Time Stones in the Loops. Heck, the god of travel had put the limiters preventing full power use on the things himself to prevent anyone from using them. So why–

Limiters temporarily off. Super Genesis Wave tainted. Will Crash both Loops if not stopped. Halt the progression of time for the

machine and event. Buy Sonic and the others the time they need to stop it. NOW.

"Time Man!" Silver called out to the allied robot master, a supreme sense of urgency overtaking him as his mind formed a plan of action. "I need you to use your Time Slow again!"

"Very well," the robot agreed, not entirely sure why the hedgehog was asking, but complying anyway.

Silver closed his eyes and felt the effects of the robot's weapon with his mind, studying it in an instant and using it as a reminder and guide for how to perform Chronos Control to achieve the same effect. How it affected what the robot master wanted to affect while leaving the rest untouched. Pulling the power of the Time Stones into himself, Silver felt his body enter its super form and began to mold it and directed the effect at the Wily Egg and the terrible machine it was activating. The device's progress would be slowed to the barest of crawls for as long as he could manage it.

"CHRONOS CONTROL!"

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 70%

The doctors ignored the way that reality crackled ominously as their device activated in their enthusiasm to destroy their opponents. Nor did they particularly take note when the progress of their device slowed to a near halt.

They did, however, notice when a golden-yellow glowing ball struck their machine across the jaw like a left cross from a giant prize fighter. And the following blast of golden energy that came from the opposite side to similar effect. Nor did they miss the silvery-gray uppercut that rattled the systems and nearly knocked them out of their chairs.

"Okay you two," a silvery-gray and white glowing Roll in her super adapter armor told her golden-yellow and white super adapter brother and their golden-yellow hedgehog friend, "I'll admit this is pretty cool."

"Told you sis," Super Mega Man grinned at Super Mega Woman.

"Knux, Shadow?" Super Sonic told the other two allies in the chamber. "Thanks for the cover. Go help Dr. Light with Blues. We've got these two."

"S-super forms?" Paradox Eggman stuttered weakly. "They're *all* in super forms..."

" *That's **NOT** fair!* " yelled Wily in a tantrum.

"FIRE EVERYTHING! LAUNCH IT ALL!" one of the doctors screamed as the Egg-Wily Machine X opened up on its three opponents and let loose with a truly obscene amount of bombs, missiles, and lasers.

"Lord Hephaestus?" the voice of Eir came over the intercom. "You have a visitor. Says it's urgent."

Hephaestus blinked and stood up to head out into the office. Hermes, letting his curiosity het the better of him, and not seeing how he could help further at the moment, double-checked to make sure his terminal was recording the fight and followed.

"Very well, what is so damned urgent it couldn't wai–" Hephaestus started, only to cut off as he saw his visitor. Even though he was a volcano god, the expression that overtook his face still caused the temperature in the outer office to drop several degrees. "...Hello father."

"Hmph," Zeus snorted. "Some greeting. And after everything I've been through for you."

"Blast it, Beat!" Dr. Light glared at the bird that hovered protectively over his son from the alcove where he and Knuckles had carried the red robot. Shadow had said he wanted to check something and gone elsewhere. But Beat was refusing to let the doctor examine Blues's systems. "Let me help him!"

For a moment, Dr. Light regretted programming his children's support units for primary loyalty to them. But then he shook it off. That kind of thinking is what estranged him from his eldest son in the first place.

"Super shield is holding!" Wily yelled as Super Sonic bombarded the chaos energy fueled barrier protecting them. "Barely!"

A shot from Super Mega Man that blazed like a miniature sun crashed into the shield and caused it to buckle. Another from Super Mega Woman shattered it entirely.

"AHH!" Paradox Eggman panicked. "I hate that robot!"

"System overload!" Wily screamed as Super Sonic carved two new holes in the war machine now that the defenses were down. "Damnit! Do something about that hedgehog!"

"I'm *trying* !" Paradox Eggman shouted back. "Why don't you do something about your own nemeses?!"

"Fun as this is," the chaos-empowered hedgehog told his companions, "we need to wrap it up. No idea how long the time freeze on the genesis wave device will hold up and that thing of the doctors is regenerating as fast as we can damage it."

"No worries," the golden Rock grinned. "I remember what we did last time."

"...?" the silver Roll looked at the two curiously.

"Oh, don't you *dare* ...!" Paradox Eggman threatened as he saw what Super Sonic and Super Mega Man were doing.

"No worries, Ivo," Wily said as he frantically entered something on his control panel. "I've got just the thing..."

Super Mega Man finished charging his arm cannon as Super Sonic revved up his Super Spin Dash on the end of the barrel. The two attacks combined in a blast that lit up the chamber and dwarfed the intended target. The shot struck the body of the Egg-Wily machine head on and detonated beautifully, flinging pieces of it all over.

But the expected return of Super Sonic from the smoke cloud didn't happen, and the two super form robots became concerned.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" came the laughter of Wily and Paradox Eggman from the still-intact head of their joint war machine.

"A noble effort, all of you!" laughed Wily.

"But thanks to Albert, all for nothing!" Paradox Eggman guffawed.

"Presenting!" Wily gestured grandly.

"The instrument of our ultimate victory!" declared Paradox Eggman.

"The greatest of the Eggman-Wily roboticized masters!" Wily cheered.

"The pinnacle of the EWN series!" Paradox Eggman continued for him with manic fervor.

"Specially reserved as EWN-011!" they both proclaimed together.

The smoke parted, and the chaos-empowered robots saw what the doctors were referring to.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 20%

"SUPER SONIC MAN!"

"Get to the point, father," Hephaestus cut off the Lord of Olympus from his 'beleaguered official' tirade.

"No respect," Zeus shook his head mournfully. "How did I ever raise such an ungrateful child?"

'You didn't,' or some variation thereof went through the minds of pretty much everyone else in the room. But no one voiced it in the interests of resolving this visit as quickly as possible.

"Oh, very well," Zeus finally relented under the collective gazes of everyone and produced a document. "Here. The Oversight Council's approval for necessary alterations to your branch, with authorization password to let Yggdrasil know it's been approved."

Hephaestus wordlessly reached for the document only for Zeus to pull it back.

"Of course, I'm sure you understand that rushing an audit like I just did is no small favor," the politically savvy storm god looked smug and expectant.

'You owe him the damn Olympian throne *several times over, you pompous disgrace,'* Hermes twitched from behind his friend.

"Roll! You handle the doctors!" Super Mega Man yelled to his sister as he charged at Super Sonic Man. He had no idea how Wily had managed to roboticize Sonic in super mode, but this wasn't the time to rail at the universe for being unfair.

Dr. Light ignored the way Knuckles was cursing at the turn of events as he wracked his mind for a way to help his son. After a moment, he

hit upon an idea. The chances of it working were less than he'd like, but the odds of making Blues worse were non-existent.

"Beat," he addressed the bird. "I need you to initiate your super adapter mode for Blues. He's weak right now and it may give him just enough energy to bring him out of danger."

The mechanical bird took a moment to process that before initiating the process.

Super Mega Woman renewed her assault on the remnants of the Egg-Wily Machine X while her brother and Super Sonic Man clashed with enough force to shake the room.

The restored shields of the machine cracked under the assault, but held firm.

"HAHAHAHA!" Paradox Eggman laughed.

"We should probably thank you," Wily grinned. "With a smaller craft to distribute chaos energy across, our defenses regenerate even faster than before!"

Roll swore internally as she dodged a retaliatory laser burst. Apparently the good news was that the machine now had fewer weapons to fire at her. But as things went, a stalemate was not beneficial to her right now.

Super Mega Man fired his buster repeatedly at Super Sonic Man, but the super form robot was simply too fast to hit with every one and the near-invincibility allowed him to shrug off the ones that did hit with little problem. The same near-invulnerability was allowing Rock as Super Mega Man to similarly shrug off the blows his opponent landed.

However, he was quickly realizing what 'nearly invulnerable' actually meant. The energy of the temporary super form was finite, and every blow took away from the gradually depleting pool he had left. And Super Sonic Man was landing more blows than he was.

And then it happened. Mega Man's pool ran out first and he dropped to his normal super adapter state. The surprise allowed Super Sonic Man to land another blow that drove him to the floor.

'That wasn't nearly as hard as it could have been,' Rock thought to himself as the super roboticized master alighted a short ways away and began walking forward purposefully. *'And he's hesitating. Either the doctors programmed Super Sonic Man to rub it in, or Sonic's fighting it.'*

Rock decided to bet on the latter and disengaged Rush, thankful the after effects of the transformation having left him with full strength.

"Go find dad, boy," he ordered his canine companion. Rush whined in protest, but still left. The super adapter had many strengths, but nowhere near enough to bridge the current gap between him and his opponent. Right now, he needed the extra maneuverability and access to his master weapons. Raw power wasn't going to cut it. Tactics and flexibility would have to pick up the slack.

Bass groaned as his memories finished realigning themselves. He recalled his life as Dr. Wily's loyal son, and also one where he'd fallen for his rival's sister. In that other life, he'd slowly begun to question his father's intentions as the man's plans began to exclude Bass more and more, until life fighting alongside his one time foes against his father was more appealing than staying loyal.

"Damnit, pops..." He groaned from where Treble supported him. At least his faithful support unit hadn't changed. Honestly, making the robot wolf loyal to Bass above even himself hadn't been one of Wily's smarter moves. But it was also the one that had made Bass question his decision to abandon his father's cause the most. Why

would a man as evil as others say put so much trust in the one he'd called his son? Why not make Bass another in his line of Mega Man Killers? Why make Bass so unique out of his creations, not just in body but in mind as well?

And why did his 'father' feel the need to rewrite his past after giving him his own Will?

"Interesting..." a new voice cut into his thoughts. Treble growled at the newcomer and Bass looked up to see a black and red hedgehog similar to Sonic. Shadow if he recalled correctly. The so-called 'ultimate lifeform'. "What have we here?"

"You realize you have lost," Super Sonic Man declared. "Surrender and your end will be painle–"

Rock cut the super form robot off with a Sharp Knuckle uppercut, followed by a Mighty Blow to the abdomen. He moved into the Electric Blade, the Trick Sword, and then the Piko Hammer not letting up for a moment. He followed with a point-blank Shockwave Boomer, then the Rabbot Laser, the Acoustic Blaster, and finally planted a Stealth Mine on the robot's chest.

That was when Super Sonic Man managed to disengage. He fired off an Omochao and then activated Ray Glide and took to the air. Super Sonic Man ignored the attacking Omochao drone and came after him. Rock switched to the Rapid Stinger and fired repeatedly as he fell downwards towards his opponent coming straight up. The super form roboticized master was almost on him when the Stealth Mine he'd ignored went off. Rock angled himself and switched to the Chroma Camo and continued his fall towards his now confused opponent.

The blue bomber latched onto Super Sonic Man's back unseen and before the robot knew what was happening, he'd been hit with the Black Wave. Rock followed with the Psycho Burst and the Chaos Cannon to ensure immobilization, and then began firing the Omega

Gatling as they fell together, continuing to fire until they hit the ground with his opponent under him.

Rock vaulted off of Super Sonic Man, turned, and fired the Hydrokinesis weapon in mid-air. He followed with the Fire Tornado to convert the lingering moisture to steam and obscure his opponent's vision and then unleashed the Tail Wind. Super Sonic Man braced against the impact, and then his form flickered.

'Yes!' the robot son of Light cheered mentally as his opponent's super form ran out and he became simply Sonic Man and was blown off his feet. Rock switched back to his Mega Buster and began charging up a Sonic Shot to restore the blue blur to normal. He took aim and fired as the Tail Wind died out.

Sonic Man hit the wall of the chamber feet first a moment before the Sonic Shot impacted. And when it did, he'd already moved out of the way.

'Scrap,' Rock swore to himself.

In the currently empty office, the success chance display ticked downwards, its drop rate mirroring the time left on Roll's super form.

"How about this, father?" Hephaestus interrupted the current head of the Olympian pantheon. "If you hand the file over and leave right now without coming back then I'll happily ignore mother's latest request indefinitely."

Zeus quirked an eyebrow in challenge. "What could she have possibly asked for that I would agree to this?"

Hephaestus gestured for Zeus to bend an ear so he could relay this information privately and began whispering the nature of the request to the divine politician.

Hermes, who had an eavesdropping spell active, winced in masculine sympathy as he heard what it was. (29)

Zeus's eyes widened and all of a sudden he couldn't hand the file over fast enough. "Wellthatsoundsfineson!Hereyougo!Bestofluck!"

And with that, the Lord of Olympus beat as hasty a retreat as he could.

Super Mega Woman sent a pair of Rocket Claws at the flying head of the Egg-Wily Machine X, only for them to be deflected by the shield.

Blues groaned as he sat up.

"Careful so–Blues," he heard Dr. Light worry. "You were hit with a rather formidable weapon. I'm not entirely sure what all it did to you."

That was right. He'd moved to block that weapon from firing on his siblings... And even though he'd blocked with his shield, it still felt like he'd been taken apart and put back together. At the atomic level. Simultaneously. While able to feel every excruciating step of the process. And–

Blues blinked and looked himself over. Why was he in super adapter mode?

Rock was arguably having an even harder time now. The end of the super form had dropped Sonic Man's power considerably, but it seemed whatever reluctance he'd had to go all-out was similarly gone.

Every shot he was firing was being dodged with Sonic's characteristic speed and ability. All he needed was for the hedgehog

to hold still for a few moments so he could hit him with a Sonic Shot, but that was easier said than done.

Thinking through his options furiously as he did his level best to avoid retaliation, he nearly passed over the one weapon he hadn't tried. Again. But he paused mentally for a moment. Maybe that was just what he needed. The seemingly ridiculous weapon had already pulled him out of one jam, so why not another?

Mega Man calmed himself as he turned indigo and purple with white trim and felt the tranquil spiritual echo of Big. The gentle giant who would brave any hardship for a friend in need, without ever thinking twice. Focusing his senses, he waited for the right moment.

'Now!' Rock cast the Fishing Rod's line and lassoed Sonic Man's legs, causing him to trip and fall.

And with that, the only thing left to do was charge up and restore his ally. Then he could see what he could do to help his sister.

Sonic rubbed his head as he came back to himself, idly noting Rock pick up the weapon orb he'd dropped out of the corner of his eye. Wow had that been a trip. He'd managed to fight the programming while the super form lasted, but for the most part that had been like watching someone else drive his body. While half asleep and barely aware of what said someone else was doing.

"You okay?" Rock asked him.

"Yeah," Sonic told him, "just remembering why I *hate* being roboticized. First time it's happened while I was Super though. Anyway, how's your sister doing?"

"Still in super mode," Rock told him as they both looked upwards towards the fight, "but it looks like she's in a stalemate with their shield. She hasn't taken any hits, so she's got some energy left but no idea how much."

"Right," Sonic nodded. "Make this quick then. I've spent a bunch of Loops working on something to get through chaos energy and now looks like as good a time as any to try it out, so tell your sister to lure them a bit lower and get ready to throw me."

"Throw you?" Rock puzzled, turning to Sonic, only for what he was about to ask to terminate in his vocal processor. Sonic was turning into a were... something. *'Were-hedgehog? Does that count if he starts as one?'*

"Ready?" Sonic asked in a deep, gravely voice. He'd lost count of how many Loops it had taken him to figure out how to hold on to Dark Gaia's energy so the beast didn't suck it out of him. Or knew he still had it so it would continue trying. And many more to work out the technique he was about to try. He'd been saving it for when it would get the best reaction from Eggman – something worthy of the album he'd been putting together – but it looked like it was needed now.

"Just a moment," Rock told him and radioed Roll the message.

Roll got the message and dove towards the floor.

"Running already?" Paradox Eggman laughed behind her.

"But this dance is just getting started!" Wily cackled as he commanded the machine after her.

She saw her brother and... was that Sonic? The currently beastial hedgehog gave her a grin and stretched his arm towards her. Super Mega Woman caught it out of reflex, and began to swing around. Sonic's arm acted like a whip and she cracked it straight at the doctors.

"Hey docs!" Sonic the Werehog growled as his hands glowed with dark energy, the antithesis of what the Chaos Emeralds produced. " *Heads up!* " Both hands clenched together as they hit the shield, and

sent a dark energy spike right through it and into the systems, causing them to spark and short all across the board.

Silver strained to keep his technique up for just a little longer, but he was at his end. He was too far out of practice and had used too much to keep the technique going at the level he needed. His super form gave out, and with it his command over the full power of the Time Stones.

"Not bad," Rock allowed, observing the way the remains of the craft fell as his sister floated down towards him.

"Yeah," Sonic declared as he landed nearby, "your sister has a good throwing arm."

"Thanks you two, I–" Roll started when she was cut off by the renewal of reality's ominous crackling as the faulty super genesis wave started up again.

"Looks like we're out of time," Sonic observed. "Roll, you're the only one with any chaos energy left, so you'll have to use Chaos Control to reverse this."

"But," Super Mega Woman's eyes widened, "I don't know *how* ! I've never done this before!"

"Don't worry sis," Rock told her as he used one of his stored utility weapons to create a pair of Item-1 platforms for himself and Sonic to float up next to his sister. "We both have. We'll guide you through it."

"Looks like this is pretty dang generous," Hephaestus mused as he looked the approval over. "I know I wouldn't be allowed some of this leeway under ordinary circumstances."

"I'm still–" Hermes stopped as he saw what the terminals were displaying. " *Holy* ! What did we *miss?!* "

"Too much," Hephaestus declared as he practically leapt into his seat and entered the approval code as fast as divinely possible. Hephaestus began typing away at his terminal furiously. However poorly things had gone up to this point, this was an opportunity not to be missed. Roll was beginning the to locally load the restoration mode of Chaos Control, and he'd never be allowed to do what he was about to try under normal circumstances. As much as he hated to admit it, his father had come through in the nick of time on this. Not that the man would actually care about that beyond what he would be owed in return.

UNIVERSAL RESTORATION PROTOCOL SUBSET 'MARVEL' LINKED TO RESTORATION PROTOCOL 'CHAOS CONTROL' CURRENTLY LOADING.

UNIVERSAL RESTORATION PROTOCOL SUBSET 'DC' LINKED TO RESTORATION PROTOCOL 'CHAOS CONTROL' CURRENTLY LOADING.

UNIVERSAL RESTORATION SUBROUTINE OF 'KEY/LOCK' SYSTEM LINKED TO RESTORATION PROTOCOL 'CHAOS CONTROL' CURRENTLY LOADING.

"Geez," Hermes observed as Hephaestus attempted to link every known restoration protocol to the one the Anchors were attempting. "Overkill much?"

"With the state this branch is in?" Hephaestus retorted absently. "I'm not sure it'll be enough."

Wily was in shock. He'd lost. Again.

You shouldn't stand for this.

All the preparations he'd made. All the mysterious foreknowledge he'd acted on. He'd countered and beguiled his opponents at every turn and he'd still lost in the end.

They deserve to die.

This was it, wasn't it? Thomas was the superior scientist with the superior creations. He'd given it everything he'd had and his old friend's robots had come out on top again.

No, they deserve to be erased.

If only Ivo hadn't...

Ivo was right about one thing in the original run.

Hmmm? A memory of Ivo? Of what might have been?

If you can't have the universe *your* way, why should *they* have it *at all?*

Wily began cackling. Yes. One last push. Play every card he had left. Make them pay.

Make *everything* pay.

Reality crackled dangerously around them as Rock and Sonic guided Roll in super form through the process.

"Feel it," Rock told her, transmitting memories of when he'd done this himself to aid her. "The energy had purpose. Intent."

"It *wants* to set things right," Sonic continued. "But it needs you to let it."

"Focus," Rock's calm voice helped everything else to fall away except the goal.

"Aim it at the junction between our realities," Sonic urged. "We've only got one shot, so it'll have to be enough."

And throughout it all, she could feel other things joining with the energy. Many, many forces finding their way through the channel somehow. Each of them with the purpose of putting the universes to rights.

Hephaestus was so focused on what he was doing that he missed the development. But Hermes didn't. The advancing reality corruption was getting so bad that echoes of alternate events were popping up for instants all over the place. But even that couldn't hide the doctors' damaged craft rising back up and taking aim at the heroes about to restore reality.

'Oh no you don't,' Hermes glared as his fingers flew over his portable terminal. What he was about to do was highly ill-advised, but hey. That's what tricksters like him did. Besides, there wasn't much he could do to make the situation *worse* .

He isolated one of the glitching defunct probability echoes and dragged it over to a particular individual.

Dr. Light watched as Blues sat up groggily, Rush helping him as best as the robo-canine could. When out of the corner of his eye, he saw the head of the Egg-Wily Machine X begin to rise up and charge its main laser cannon, the clear intent to fire on the ones trying to restore the two universes to their proper state.

And there was nothing he could do about it.

"Oh no..." he began, when a blur of shining bronze zoomed past him.

Turning around in confusion, he saw a distinct lack of his eldest son.

"Knuckles, where...?"

"Proto Man just... went super," Knuckles stared incredulously after the bronze form. " *Without* the Chaos Emeralds..."

Blues had no idea where the sudden rush of energy came from, but he knew exactly what to do with it. The doctors were trying to interfere with his siblings' attempt to fix the damage they'd done to reality and he was going to stop them.

He activated his super adapter's blade more out of habit than anything, since it was most likely his shield that wou–

Program Advance: LifeSrd3

Blues had no idea where the ability came from, but he didn't particularly care at the moment. He interposed his energized 'super form' between the remains of the Egg-Wily Machine X and his sister and swung his blade for all it was worth at the same time the war machine's laser cannon fired at full charge.

The energy wave that erupted from his blade parted the cannon's laser right down the middle and bisected the machine as well.

And then Super Proto Man's transformation gave out. Because it technically hadn't really been there in the first place.

Hermes stared. Sure, reality was glitching horribly so what he'd seen probably wasn't impossible for the time being, but the sheer *odds* against a beneficial glitch hitting at that exact moment...

He looked calculatingly at his terminal. The only thing that could have arranged such a random-seeming event was Yggdrasil itself.

LOCAL RESTORATION PROTOCOL 'WORLD HEALING WAVE' LINKED TO RESTORATION PROTOCOL 'CHAOS CONTROL' CURRENTLY LOADING.

WISH PROTOCOL 'DRAGON BALLS' LINKED TO RESTORATION PROTOCOL 'CHAOS CONTROL' CURRENTLY LOADING.

(30)

"CHAOS CONTROL!"

The orb of reality-restoring energy left Roll's hands and hit the rift at the center of the disturbance, and the bright warm energy of a genesis wave reversing itself washed over everyone and everything.

LINKED RESTORATION PROTOCOLS SUCCESSFUL.

ARTIFICIALLY INDUCED UNIVERSAL DATA CORRUPTION REVERSED.

BRANCH DESIGNATED 'SONIC' RESTORED TO FULL LOOP FUNCTIONALITY.

BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' ASSESSMENT:

SECTION 1 RESTORED TO PARTIAL LOOP FUNCTIONALITY

SECTION 2 CORRUPTION LEVELS REDUCED

STABILITY OF SECTION 1 REQUIRED FOR LINKED LOOP ACTIVATION ATTEMPTS

SECTION 3 CORRUPTION LEVELS REDUCED

STABILITY OF SECTION 1 REQUIRED FOR LINKED LOOP ACTIVATION ATTEMPTS

STABILITY OF SECTION 2 ADVISED FOR LINKED LOOP ACTIVATION ATTEMPTS

SECTION 4 CORRUPTION LEVELS REDUCED

STABILITY OF SECTION 1 REQUIRED FOR LINKED LOOP ACTIVATION ATTEMPTS

SECTION 5 CORRUPTION LEVELS REDUCED

STABILITY OF SECTION 4 REQUIRED FOR LINKED LOOP ACTIVATION ATTEMPTS

SECTION 6 CORRUPTION LEVELS REDUCED

STABILITY OF SECTIONS 2 & 3 REQUIRED FOR LINKED LOOP ACTIVATION ATTEMPTS

SECTION 7 CORRUPTION LEVELS REDUCED

STABILITY OF SECTIONS 2, 3, AND 6 REQUIRED FOR LINKED LOOP ACTIVATION ATTEMPTS

SECTION X PARTIALLY RECOVERED

Hephaestus breathed a sigh of relief as Hermes clapped him on the back. It was over. There was nothing worth mentioning between now and the end of the scenario that could possibly keep the Loop from stabilizing.

"Um..." came the voice of one of the nymphs. "Aren't they all supposed to be back in their home Loops right now?"

What?

Hephaestus blinked and grabbed for his terminal to examine what was happening. The reality-restoring powers of the Chaos Emeralds had worked as advertised, but everyone was still in the pocket Skaia Protocol/Special Zone reality instead of their home Loops.

SKAIA PROTOCOL PROPERTIES RENDERED INERT.

'SPECIAL ZONE' PROPERTIES RENDERED INERT.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: A8%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

WARNING: SCENARIO PARAMETERS HAVE CHANGED.

ALL PRIOR YGGDRASIL PREDICTIONS REGARDING SCENARIO RENDERED INVALID.

RECALCULATING...

'No,' Hephaestus thought in horror as he typed several lines into his terminal. *'No no no nonoNO!'*

"What in Tartarus...?" Hermes stared in confusion.

PROJECTED UNIVERSAL DEGRADATION OF BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' IF ACTIVATION ATTEMPT IS UNSUCCESSFUL: TOTAL

"DAMNIT!" Hephaestus slammed his fists down on his terminal.

"What?" Hermes jumped. "What's going on?!"

"A virus slipped past the firewalls and infected the end of the scenario! The parameters are corrupted past this point!" Hephaestus panicked.

" *Yggdrasil's running the Loop blind!* "

---

1) I can't recall the title right now, but there was a Mega Man fanfic I read years ago that had a functionally insane Doc Robot as a recurring antagonist. And that characterization stuck with me so well that I have a hard time imagining him any other way.

2) Ship Teasing.

3) Because the Time Stones are supposed to grant control over time itself, and that's bad for the Loops right now. Silver's pretty much charged with making sure no one uses the things to crash (note the lower-case) the Sonicverse.

4) A lot of Charmy's Loop abilities seem to be psychosomatic. He has to dress the part to access them.

5) Steeerike!

6) "GET OVER HERE!"

7) I'm quoting some fanfic (I forget the name, which seems to be a recurring thing for me) where Rock went to a mirror universe and evil!Auto said more-or-less this exact quote when he was about to blow himself up in order to take the heroes with him.

And, yes, the Skaia/Zone fusion has caused the paradox clones from Homestuck to instead manifest as robot clones.

8) Omega finds destruction to be beautiful, as well as things that cause destruction. The more, the better. Blaze is an extremely powerful pyrokinetic. So Omega has something of a crush on her.

9) Yeah, this isn't encouraging...

10) This scene takes up exactly four panels in the comic, and the conversation here mirrors it word-for-word. I timed how long it took me to read the dialogue out loud, and then added almost ten seconds as a margin of error because I read fast. The conclusion? Dr. Light managed to go from scavenged robot master parts to firing a fully functioning Mega Buster *in less than half a minute* . In the middle of a war zone. While holding this exact conversation.

Angus Macgyver *wishes* he was this good.

11) I've taken a few liberties with the scene due to changes in events, but this is pretty much how it goes in *Worlds Collide* after

Eggman tosses Dr. Light out of the Wily Egg (sans Paradox robo-clone) just like in the earlier scene.

12) Show of hands. How many of you can't get this image out of your head now?

13) Doc Robot's being vewwy, vewwy quiet.

14) In the baseline, Tails accompanied Sonic and Mega Man and is the one who ends up taking the misfired Ballade Cracker. To the face. (He lives though)

15) *Gapes* Dude! WTF?!

16) I don't know why, but the Mighty Mouse theme song suddenly started blaring in my head right about this point.

17) A full set of Chaos Emeralds doesn't always play well with another. It's usually not universe-breaking, but hey, Chaos.

18) Duo is what's known as 'Loop Aware'. He doesn't recall other Loops, but his connections to the fabric of reality allow him to know that the Loops are, in fact, happening. Unlike some other Loop Aware entities, he doesn't consider it his job to try and fix things or enforce baseline events.

19) The good news is that Waltz is the only known entity in the multiverse that can take advantage of this unique and improbable convergence of circumstances.

20) Haruno Sakura of course, trope namer for Sakura Syndrome.

21) Not of Wales.

22) Not my original idea. Honestly, considering the 'rock-paper-scissors' nature of the Mega Man games, it's a wonder it took as long as it did for a paper-themed robot master to be created in official media.

23) Ending tally: Lots of posturing, rubbing the heroes faces in their supposed failure, mutual sniping between the no-longer-friends, normal genesis wave merely 'shuffles' reality, super genesis wave can rebuild from the ground up, the doctors plan to write the heroes out of their new reality (which would normally cause the kind of Loop crash that sends everyone to Eiken for a time-out), the doctors ignore the warnings about how what they're trying could cause their universes to collapse, and everything looks pretty dang dire across the board.

24) He used the Copy Chip on the Extreme Gear Blaze and her group rode on earlier, and then uploaded the design to Beat's transformation matrix. Come on, the guy has the Cool Shades and the Scarf of Asskicking already. A Cool Hover Board was the next logical step, really.

25) Insert dark reprise of the Ruby Spears cartoon theme here.

26) Chekov's Gun: Fire.

27) Actually, she doesn't. Being the admin for Eiken is as work-free as a job can possibly get. And Aphrodite's employee profile clearly says she's allergic to work.

28) Swearing and groaning at the same time, of course. Or swearing and moaning. Take your pick.

29) In a nutshell: Hera asked for a set of jewelry inlaid with the family jewels. Zeus's 'family jewels' to be precise.

30) SILLY PROTOCOL 'KITCHEN SINK' LINKED TO RESTORATION PROTOCOL 'CHAOS CONTROL' CURRENTLY LOADING.

31) Well, that's it folks! The battle's over and the heroes are victorious and–Wait, what? Oh, you're *kidding!* No, my subconscious is *not* doing this to me! Not after all that! ***Damn you subconscious!*** Why you have to pull victory out from under the heroes like that?!

Loop 1 Part 6: Overtime!

Mega Loop 1.0 Part 6: Overtime!

Rock blinked. "We're still here."

Roll, no longer in super form but still in her super adapter, looked at him. "Were we supposed to be somewhere else?"

"Yeah," Sonic piped up. "Everything should have gone back to where and when it was before. Heck, this whole Zone shouldn't still be here. Something's up."

"My memories of the last time have fully restored," Rock allowed, "and they show me waking back up in our home universe after firing off Chaos Control."

"Well," Blues sat up from where he'd fallen nearby when his mysterious super form had cut out. He was feeling... mostly better. "Before we do anything else, we should probably secure the doctors."

"When did–?" Rock and Roll blinked in surprise at seeing their brother up and about.

"When you were charging the Chaos Control," Blues told them. "The doctor tried to shoot you. I stopped them. Not entirely sure how though."

"Yeah," Sonic swallowed nervously at hearing how close a call they'd just had, "thanks man. If they'd succeeded it would have been... bad."

"Is everyone alright?" asked Dr. Light as he and Knuckles coasted over on Rush's jet form and the loaned Item-2 jet respectively.

"Well, Albert?" moaned Paradox Eggman from his personal craft, ejected at the last moment before the last of the Egg-Wily Machine X was destroyed. "What now?"

Wily in his own saucer took a moment, as if listening to something. "Now we make a tactical retreat, Ivo. I've still got cards left to play, but we're vulnerable right here and now."

"Hey!" Sonic blurted suddenly. "The docs are making a break for it!"

With that, he took off running towards where the two doctors were indeed flying their personal craft at the opening Knuckles had made when he, Shadow, and Blues had busted in.

After a moment, he realized there was someone running alongside him and turned to look at his ally in surprise.

"You get one guess what your master weapon was," (1) the still-blue and cyan Rock grinned at him as he raced alongside the hedgehog. For an instant, Sonic could almost swear there was an image of himself hovering over the robot, but the feeling vanished and Sonic grinned back.

"So you got the speed? Then let's see if you can handle the pace!"

Air Man was in mid-jump, flinging miniature tornadoes at any enemy he could see with his Air Shooter, when a bolt of electricity struck him in the back, sending him to the ground. He turned, and saw Elec Man approach, lightning crackling over his fingertips. Elec Man looked at him with a smirk, and said with bravado: "Hey, Airhead, you've got three seconds to live, I suggest you use them wisely."

"Foolish creation of Light," Airman shot back, "I control the air itself, you are a pitiful static charger. Once one of my tornadoes strikes you, you are finished. You will never escape its vortex."

"Ha! How arrogant of you!" Elec Man retorted with no small amount of hypocrisy. "Can you put lightning in a jar? Can you put a thunderstorm under lock and key!?" he yelled.

"YES I CAN!" Air Man declared, firing dozens of tornadoes at his foe.

Elec Man, brimming with confidence, closed the distance, avoiding each shot, then loosed his Thunder Beam at full charge, shocking Air Man down to his core. Elec Man walked by Air Man with a smirk as the robot master collapsed, smoking. "Sorry airhead, but you just can't defeat Elec Man." (2)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: #3%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

Sally was the first to notice it. Their opponents had... stopped returning after they were defeated since the wave passed over everything.

"Full press everyone!" She yelled, taking a moment to use her energy blades on Magic Man. "The doctors can't time clone them anymore!"

Shortly after Mega Man sped off with Sonic to chase the doctors, Knuckles was nearly thrown off his feet when the robot Dr. Light had identified as Duo crashed up through the floor with Chaos 0 riding on his back.

"Dr. Light," the large alien robot declared, "I have restored this Guardian of Chaos to his proper self."

Knuckles quirked an eyebrow. That was an interesting way to refer to Chaos. Not exactly inaccurate either.

"Where are the doctors?" Duo asked. "Their Evil actions demand that Justice be served."

"My brother and Sonic took off after them," Roll told him as she and her remaining brother disengaged their super adapters and had their companions turn into their personal jet forms. Roll idly noted the new 'hoverboard' appearance that Beat had taken on as they did.

"I contacted Shade," Blues continued for her, "and the robot master army is beginning to thin. We should go there first and finish up so that our full forces can be brought against the doctors and whatever they have left in reserve."

"I'd prefer to bring Shadow back with us," Knuckles added, "but he's not answering his radio so we'll have to go without him."

"Are you not concerned for your ally?" Duo questioned the echidna.

"Nah," Knuckles waved the question off as he fired up the loaned Item-2 jet, Dr. Light getting aboard Rush's own jet mode. "He can handle himself just fine."

"So," Shadow asked the ebony robot before him, "how do you want to do this?"

Rock was starting to realize why Sonic was such an action addict. This was amazing!

After exiting the Wily Egg's interior, the doctors had stuck close to the surface, allowing Sonic and Rock to run on it after them. Only their speed kept the two heroes from sliding down the steep angle.

Why the doctors had chosen to stay close became clear as exterior defenses clearly made with just this sort of high speed battle in mind activated and began firing on them. Rock occupied himself with destroying the defenses and harassing the doctors with his Mega Buster, which utility weapons like Sonic's allowed for, while Sonic himself was doing his best to disable their craft with Homing Attacks.

If at all possible, the goal was to prevent the doctors from re-entering the Wily Egg at another location.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 2!%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

"Hey guys," Oil Man said nervously as the flame-wielding robots Turbo Man and Capricorn closed in on him. "No hard feelings, right?" (3)

He'd crashed into Turbo Man's race car mode using his Oil Slider and they'd both gone careening into Capricorn while he was dueling Antoine.

In response to his question Capricorn's saber ignited, as did the large spinning wheels that made up Turbo Man's shoulders.

"In a moment, no," Turbo Man declared. "There won't be any hard feelings at all then."

Fortunately before they could advance any further, a sword erupted from Capricorn's torso from behind and a violet female form kicked Turbo Man in the head, knocking him over.

"Zis eez not how an honorable opponent comports himself," Antoine glared as he finished off Capricorn, "no?"

Oil Man was more concerned with the way his other savior had stumbled after knocking Turbo Man over. "Whoa there hot stuff!" he cautioned as he steadied her. "You alright?"

"I'll be fine," Blaze told him as Antoine engaged Turbo Man and slashed his tires. "Still a little light headed from what happened earlier." *'Not that surprising,'* she added mentally. *'It's not often I'm knocked out of super form that hard.'*

"Not sure I agree with that, babe," Oil Man returned unbelievingly.

"It's fine," Blaze insisted, summoning a large ball of fire to re-enter the fray, "I can handle–"

Her head swam again and she stumbled, only for Oil Man to catch her once more.

"Yeah, it doesn't look like you're at 100%, hot stuff," he told her flatly.

"It doesn't matter," She clenched her teeth. "My flames are needed."

"Tell ya what," the robot changed tactics. "Can you handle a candle without hurting yourself?"

"I am Blaze," she sneered, "mistress of flame. And this battle needs much more than a *candle* ."

"I ain't disagreeing, babe," he stared straight back. "I'm *Oil* Man. If you can make a candle, I can turn it into an inferno."

Blaze turned that over in her aching head. "Very well."

A moment later Plant Man and Search Man were lit up by the flamethrower the two had produced.

"Give it up Cut Man!" Metal Man yelled as the two robots flung their trademark blades at each other. "I'm the superior model! I'm stronger! Faster! And my Metal Blades are sharper!"

"Yeah, you're a real cut-up alright!" Cut Man called back. "But you forgot a few things!"

"Like what?" Metal Man asked.

"One," Cut Man said as he grabbed two Metal Blades with his bare hands, "I'm not the one weak to bladed objects."

Metal Man replied by throwing more of the circular saw weapons at his opponent.

"Two," Cut Man deflected the weapons with the ones he'd caught, "the Rolling Cutter's a boomerang-style weapon."

Metal Man's eyes widened as one of the returning scissor-like weapons sheared through his neck.

"But it's nothing to lose your head over."

Time Man almost casually activated his Time Slow as Quick Man made for him and just as casually dispatched the speedster.

"Oh, that feels good!" Grenade Man cried as he exploded.

"Weirdo," Bomb Man declared. (4)

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: M5%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

Fire Man and Ice Man stood back-to-back as they took out Cold Man and Burner Man respectively.

Guts Man was plowing through the opposition when he spotted Charge Man gunning for him. Planting his feet, he drew back his fist and got ready.

"Last stop!" he yelled as he belted Charge Man in the face, sending the train-themed robot master careening across the ground. "Everybody off!"

Rock was impressed with the efficiency of the weapon he'd gained from Sonic. He and the hedgehog had been chasing the doctors over the Wily Egg's surface for a while, denied them two alternate entry points, and it still had over half its energy left.

Hmm... If he knew Wily, and he did, the doctor would be switching tactics about now.

Wily got a far-away look in his eyes for a moment before calling out to his partner.

"Ivo! The new developments are almost ready, but we're getting nowhere like this! Time to move to a different battlefield!"

Paradox Eggman looked at the plan Albert had messaged him and grinned. "Brilliant! That'll shake things up for sure!"

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 1*%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

"Okay!" Hephaestus declared. "I think I've isolated the scenario corruption enough that I can repair it!"

"While the Loop's running?" Hermes looked at his companion. "Isn't that kind of risky?"

"If you've got an alternative, I'd like to hear it!"

"Just making sure man," the god of travel held up his hands defensively. "Anything I can help with?"

"Yes!" the volcanic god told him. "Wily's got a virus in his code, I'm sure of it now! I need you to find and either delete, quarantine, or firewall it! He's bad enough as a Dreamer, I don't need him viral on top of it!"

"Uh, exactly how–"

"You're a trickster, aren't you?" the god of the forge cut him off. "Get creative!"

Can you feel that?

Nnng... The headaches were getting worse, but they came with such ideas!

Reality is trying to stop you. Keep you down. Prevent you from achieving the fruits of your genius. Ensure that you'll always be second to Thomas for all eternity.

Yes... It was so clear now. Fate and even creation itself were against him. So they'd pay like all the others...

Do it. End it all.

Because he was a genius!

Duo charged ahead of the rest of the group coming from the Wily Egg and hit the ground in an explosion of energy. The impact

decimated a half-dozen robot masters and knocked several more off their feet.

The doctors had changed course and of course the two heroes had chased after them. They'd gone up to the top of the battlestation, and then straight down the other side. Down and down the two heroes had chased the doctors, the slope of the Wily Egg they traversed getting ever steeper until they were in more of a controlled free-fall than an actual run.

And then the doctors began to pull away into the open air.

"Oh, that's just playing dirty!" Sonic complained as the doctors laughed at the two heroes.

Rock's mind however was racing. His utility-class weapons were among the few that supported simultaneous use with his Mega Buster, something he'd discussed with Dr. Light and the two had worked together on an upgrade to his systems. An upgrade that would let him use two utility weapons at once. Plus an add-on Dr. Light had come up with to fire the items into place at range if necessary.

"Trust me," he told Sonic. "I've got an idea."

Rock switched to a particular upgrade that had been made for his brother Blues since Beat as an aerial unit didn't properly support ground-bound modes. The Coil Adapter essentially generated a device that performed the same function as the Rush and Tango Coils.

With it, he fired off two of the devices ahead right into his and Sonic's paths.

"Sweet!" the hedgehog grinned as they both hit the devices at a run and sprang out into the open air after the doctors.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: N0%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

Hephaestus twitched at the notice as he continued typing away.

Blues and Knuckles fought side by side through the diminishing throng of robot masters, all opposition falling to their combined might.

"Well, that's that Albert!" Paradox Eggman gloated. "No way they can jump far enough to get us out–eh?"

"All weapons ready Ivo!" Wily furiously mashed buttons in his craft. "Knock them out of the sky!"

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Paradox Eggman yelled back as he began similar frantic button mashing.

"Hey there Ugly! I'm Aqua Man, but you can call me handsome!" the self-identified robot master gloated to Chaos 0. Up until the liquid guardian leapt down the barrel of his cannon and expanded in the robot's water tank until he burst of course.

Rouge lamented the fact that this would be the last time she'd be able to pry Jewel Man's head gem off as the Chaotix brawled past, downing Dyna Man and Torch Man among others.

"There you are," Hermes spoke towards his terminal as he located the virus infecting Dr. Wily's code. "Geez, you've really dug in haven't you?"

First things first, quarantine Wily so the virus couldn't spread. The work Hephaestus had put together for that Waltz character would be plenty for this task, and fortunately the evidence pointed to Wily being the only one infected. With this virus at least.

"Now to see if I can't reverse what you're doing to the bad doctor..."

No! We will not be contained! We will not be denied!

No, no he wouldn't. He had nothing left to lose and plenty of cards left to play.

An end to everything!

Now that they weren't running anymore, Rock had switched out of Sonic Speed. He'd also switched to another weapon that fit the situation and timed it just right before firing as he and Sonic neared the apex of their spring-aided jump.

They'd each performed synchronized linear three-point landings on a Super Arrow and allowed it to carry them through the air towards the doctors battlecrafts.

"This is tight!" Sonic exclaimed. "It's like grinding on air!"

"Not one of my favorites," Rock admitted, "but it works for stuff like this."

And then they were in the zone of engagement. (5) As Rock exchanged fire with Wily's saucer, Paradox Eggman swung a massive wrecking ball chained to his craft at Sonic. The hedgehog leapt over the assault, sacrificing the Super Arrow, and went for a Homing Attack.

"Foolish hedgehog!" Paradox Eggman called out. "There's nothing to land on!"

Rock ceased his fire for a moment to jump from his Super Arrow and fire off an Item-1 platform right where Sonic would land and then a pair of Item-3s which attached themselves to each doctor's craft.

"You were saying, doc?" Sonic taunted as he went for another attack.

Rock jumped off as Wily retreated into his craft and electrified the exterior as Paradox Eggman's wrecking ball swung up nearby. Switching to the Wire Adapter, he latched onto the wrecking ball and swung under Paradox Eggman's craft and created two more Item-1 platforms for Sonic before switching to his Mega Buster.

Sonic took the hint and bounded off of the lower platform, Homing Attacked the hover mechanisms for Wily's saucer, and landed on the other. As he did so, Rock shot out the thrust for Paradox Eggman's craft with his Mega Buster as he rode his wire attached to the craft's wrecking ball.

"You fools!" Wily cried. "Now we'll *all* crash!"

"Nah," Sonic retorted as his upwards Spin Dash clipped the side of Wily's saucer even as Rock swung back up above Paradox Eggman's and began firing on the craft. "After all, *we're* awesome."

"We'll see about that!" the doctors both yelled and counter-attacked.

Yes. Make ..em pay. Make them a.. pa..

Was his headache clearing up?

Hermes frowned as he did his best to firewall the virus in Dr. Wily and break its hold on the man. It had done its best to wrap around Wily's core identity. If Hephaestus hadn't noticed it, then the virus would have been able to dig in further, eventually making removal

impossible without doing irreparable damage to the man's personality.

Not that Wily was a shining example in the first place, but it was the principle of the thing.

Cloud Man exploded from one of Shade's bombs as Dr. Light used his makeshift arm cannon to disable Magma Man. A short ways away Tails in the Tornado's walker mode and E-123 Omega gunned down a few other robot masters.

Rock had managed to land on the Item-3 still attached to Paradox Eggman's craft, but Sonic had taken a hit and began falling.

Without thinking, Rock dove after him and fired a Carry platform – Item-1 was running low – below Sonic and a Coil Adapter atop it. The hedgehog hit the spring and rebounded upwards as Rock formed an Item-2 under himself and rocketed after him.

Taking a moment to latch a few more Item-3s onto the doctor's crafts – just in time for Sonic to land on one after another Homing Attack – Rock then switched to his Mega Buster and began firing.

The doctors both swore and counter-attacked, a shot managing to take out Rock's Item-2 jet as he circled Wily's saucer. Thinking fast, he latched onto it with the Wire Adapter and began placing Balloon Adapters as he swung around at high speed, Sonic following behind him to pinball between the balloon platforms and Wily's personal craft. Damaged, the saucer began losing altitude fast.

As he came back around, Rock disengaged the Wire and let himself be flung towards Paradox Eggman's craft at high speeds, Sonic right behind him. They impacted the flying vehicle with great force, sending it plummeting as well.

"Hate! You! Both!" Paradox Eggman yelled up at them as he and Wily frantically tried to get propulsion back online before they crashed into the ground.

"You do have a plan for us getting down safely, right?" Sonic asked.

"Oh, I've saved the best for last," Rock grinned back.

"Sacre bleu!"

The rest of the freedom fighters, plus Cream and Cheese, looked up at Antoine's exclamation to see the falling crafts of the doctors. With the forms of Sonic and Mega Man in freefall right behind them.

"Damnit Rock!" Roll yelled from nearby as she blasted Bright Man. "How is this being careful?!"

A triumphant cry from the doctors as well as their slowed descent indicated that they'd gotten their crafts back in working order.

"Any time now," Sonic sniped impatiently as the ground got closer.

Rock grinned as he reactivated the Sonic Speed weapon as well as one of his all-time favorites. Heck, it was one of the few weapons he regularly practiced with in his spare time.

Pointing his arm cannon ahead of them, Rock produced a glowing blue platform at just the right angle for the two to run on. As they got closed to the ground, Rock curved it so their downward momentum would become lateral momentum.

"This is awesome!" Sonic cheered as he raced on the glowing energy road his friend was making even as they raced along it.

"I know, right?" Rock yelled back. "Just keep going, I've got everything under control!"

Sonic responded by smirking and revving into a Spin Dash as the platform leveled out and extended in the direction of Paradox Eggman's craft while Rock skidded to a halt.

"Fools!" Paradox Eggman righted himself and swung his wrecking ball towards the underside of the platform. "I've got you right where I want you!"

The wrecking ball impacted the glowing platform just as Sonic reached that section... and didn't even make it shudder.

"Oh–" Paradox Eggman swore as Sonic blasted straight through his craft and sent the double flying.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 6&%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

"I am the last robot master!" Bubble Man declared as the rest of his compatriots finished falling. "That means I am death incarnate! Come and meet your doo–"

Bubble Man was cut off when Paradox Eggman smashed him into the ground and continued rolling into the midst of the gathered warriors. Looking up and realizing he was surrounded by Sonic's allies and without a weapon of his own, the face of Paradox Eggman flipped around to show an electronic countdown.

"Paradox Eggman is–" ***ZAP***

"Yeah, we'll have none of that," Elec Man stated as he used his electrical abilities to short out the robot double's detonator, along with most of its other systems. The inert metal body of the false Eggman collapsed to the ground as he spoke. (6)

E.. ...n.. D. .. .. i... .t... ...!

It was clearing up. His headache was nearly gone, but the ideas that had come with it had served their purpose.

He knew what he had to do.

Hermes swore under his breath. He almost had the virus fully firewalled off from Wily's main personality code, but the damage had been done.

"The virus is just about contained, man," he told his compatriot, "and I've synched up the Loop reset to regenerate the damage to Wily's personality, but the guy's just not changing his mind."

"They can handle him," Hephaestus muttered distractedly as he typed away furiously at his terminal. He had to get the parameters fixed or the Loop wouldn't be able to either reach proper completion or finish setting the Anchors in place.

As Duo used his Justice Energy to help Blaze (or the 'Lady of Righteous Flames' as he called her) recover, the rest of the group surrounded Wily's saucer. Nearby, Orbot and Cubot curled up into their more durable geometric forms.

"It's over Albert," Dr. Light told him. "You've lost. I saw the Genesis Wave Device rendered inoperable by the feedback when Roll restored reality, your army lies defeated, and your partner was slain by your own actions. There is nothing left for you here."

Wily simply began laughing. And laughing. It began to unnerve everyone a bit actually. The only people who laughed like that were those who had completely cracked, or weren't as beaten as they seemed.

And while there was ample evidence for the former, no one was ready to discount the latter.

"And why should I Thomas?" Wily cackled and pointed upwards. "When I've still got this!"

Getting a sinking feeling, all present looked upwards and beheld a fleet of airships stretching to the horizon constructed in the joint Eggman-Wily theme. All were armed to the teeth and headed by what Sonic and his allies recognized as the Egg Carrier as well as what Rock and his family knew to be the Wily Battleship.

'Yep,' Sonic thought to himself, *'that would have been enough to take Prospit and Derse's armies.'*

"If you say so Heph," Hermes turned back to his own terminal.

Tails tuned out Wily's rant about how he and Eggman had 'gone easy' on them all and 'let them' get as far as they did. They'd probably just had the fleet too far and spread out to recall quickly or easily. Which would explain all the delaying tactics they'd thrown at everyone along the way here now that he thought about it.

He was getting out the secret weapon Knuckles had asked him to bring along just in case something like this happened. He'd have gotten it out earlier, but he'd been too caught up in the massive melee to heed the echidna's signals and forgotten he'd had it.

"There we go," Knuckles grinned as Tails lowered the Master Emerald out of the Tornado's storage bay. It was a good thing they'd worked on a backup system for the floating island this Loop so this could be done. "Don't worry everyone, I've got this."

And with that, Knuckles used the massive gem's power to transform into the glowing pink Hyper Knuckles and took to the air towards the massive fleet.

"Cease your Evil actions at once Dr. Wily and surrender yourself to Justice," Duo demanded of the doctor. It was only the request of Dr. Light that he stayed his hand from smiting the madman where he stood. "I can feel the power of my ally and your fleet is no match."

The madman laughed at him. "Is that so?"

A different power flared and Duo turned in time to see his empowered ally struck by a massive beam from the floating battlestation. The feeling of empowerment vanished and Duo immediately flew off to prevent his crimson ally from falling to his death.

Wily's laughter followed him mockingly.

So focused was he on the rescue of a Just hero that he missed the flare as Wily's saucer drew power from somewhere to simultaneously repair itself and create a shockwave that threw his gathered allies off their feet.

So focused was he on ensuring that he halted the red beast-man's fall safely that he missed the build-up of power from Wily's saucer directed at him.

But even he could never be so focused that he didn't notice a beam of concentrated Evil Energy pierce his torso.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: $4%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

"If you say so."

"Duo!" Rock shouted in alarm as the charged beam of dark purple energy lanced from Wily's saucer through the alien robot's body.

"Knux!" Sonic yelled as both Duo and the unconscious red body of the echidna in question began to fall.

And then they halted in midair as a tractor beam snagged them.

"Who dares interfere!" Wily demanded to the source of the tractor beam, a carrier-type hovercraft that loosely resembled a certain moth from a series of popular giant monster movies. "How did you get past my fleet?!"

"I dare," proclaimed a blond-brown haired, bearded, and bispectacled scientist who appeared on a holographic projection in front of the craft as the two figures in the tractor beam were carefully lowered to the ground.

"Dr. Cossack!" several members of the Light family cheered.

The named scientist pushed his glasses back up his nose as he regarded Wily. "And you should really install some better firewalls in your airships, comrade."

Indeed, the entire fleet was not only not firing on the craft, several seemed to be listing off course. Even as those below watched, several crashed into their neighbors and went down in flames.

Wily fumed at the sight. "You think you're so smart Cossack! But let's see you deal with this!"

He pressed a button and a flash of teleportation went off in the middle of the gathered heroes. Right over Chaos 0 in fact.

When the light died down, a brand new Devil Core could be seen trying to assimilate itself into the liquid body of Chaos. And succeeding. The burst of Chaos's expansion back into the Chaos

Devil threw back all those around it and the beast roared its challenge.

"Heel," Wily commanded his reacquired asset, and the Chaos Devil did exactly that.

"Is that all you have left doctor?" Cossack stared down from his projection.

"No," Wily grinned and pressed a button in his saucer. "Not at all."

More flashes of teleportation lit up the battlefield on Wily's side.

The Light family listed off each one as it appeared.

"Fake Man," Rock pointed out the police robot. "Make that a squad of Fake Men."

"Metool Daddy," Roll said as a giant met smashed into the ground.

"Mecha Dragon," Rock identified the large mechanical dragon next to the giant Guts Man tank. "Guts Dozer."

"CWU-01P," Roll noted a machine in a bubble as a green alien appeared next to it out of thin air in the middle of a bunch of flying square drones. "That damn alien hologram from his second invasion, Picopico-kun drones."

"The four Dark Men," Blues scowled at the four clear dome-headed robots; one green with tank-treads instead of legs and an arm cannon, one gray one that crackled with electromagnetic energy, a purple one with a machine-cannon in place of an arm, and a crimson one that seemed as strong as all of the other three; fortunately with purely robotic processors this time. "Big PETS, CircringQ9," he added the pillar-like robot and the one encased in a ring of metal.

"Tank CSII," Dr. Light frowned at the tripod-wheeled weapon before turning to the tank-treaded torso piloted by a metool and the robot apatosaurus. "Metonger Z, Mechazaurus."

"Mash," Rock stared at what looked like a ball with arm and leg caricatures, and a tiny head as an afterthought next to a robot crab and a steamroller with a mohawk. "Yadocargo, Grinder."

"King," Blues stated flatly as an axe-wielding orange robot in a cape appeared along with a purple tank and a purple flying machine.

"Seriously?" Sonic raised an eyebrow.

"He beat me in single combat last time we met," Blues informed the hedgehog.

"Gotcha," Sonic returned to being serious as more arrivals were noted.

"Bliking," Roll observed a steel-gray flying machine with flat wings that looked like they extended. Next to it was a giant metal turtle and a flying mask with guns. "Gameriser, HannyaNED², and are those Weapons Archive drones?"

"Weapons Archive?" Sally inquired of the cylindrical drones with spikes on top and bottom.

"Each one contains a weapon from one of Dr. Wily's robot masters," Rock began.

"Even ours," Elec Man added.

"And probably yours from when you were roboticized," Rock finished. "There's certainly enough of them."

"Apollo and Luna, leaders of the Constellation Droids," Dr. Light noted two familiar faces. "Damnit Albert..."

"CRORQ," Roll called attention to something that to Sonic and several of his allies looked like the bastard offspring of a supercomputer and one of those Imperial AT-ST Walkers from the Star Wars Loop.

"Yellow Devil, Green Devil, Block Devil," Rock listed each of the Devil series creations forming alongside the Chaos Devil before his voice hitched with the next one. "R-Ra Devil?"

"And Dark Moon," Blues noted the last. "Which means..."

"Ra Thor," Rock gulped as the black robot appeared.

"Terra," Roll's voice trembled, "and the rest of the Stardroids. Even... scrap, that's *Sunstar* ."

"And who's your alien buddy's evil twin?" Sonic asked of the next arrival.

"His name... is Slur," Duo gasped from behind them as he struggled to his feet, waving off concern as he tried to cover the gaping hole in his torso. "I am damaged... not slain my friends. And yes... that one is the... avatar of Evil... as I am the same for Justice. We... are eternal foes."

'Oh, that's not good,' Sonic thought to himself. The Duo guy was knocking on super form strength normally and now there was an evil version of him to fight?

And finally, an off-color copy of Wily's saucer appeared next to the real thing piloted by an obvious robot double before the two vanished and reappeared back among the main force.

"What," Dr. Cossack observed calmly, "no Gamma?"

Wily muttered something that sounded like 'damn size limitations' before responding. "I do not *need* Gamma with this army!"

"Excuse me?" Sunstar was suddenly in between the two saucers looking unfriendly. (7) "Why should *we* lower ourselves to work with such an inferior lifeform as *you* ?"

"Because we have a common enemy," Wily was looking as if he was trying not to sweat. "We can settle things between ourselves after Mega Man and his allies lie dead by our hands."

Sunstar was silent for a long moment.

"What about you?" Terra turned to Slur. "You with us or him?"

"I am with whoever shall do the most for the cause of Evil," Slur dismissed the Stardroid. "And for now that seems like the 'inferior' lifeform has exceeded you in that regard."

"Very well," Sunstar's agreement cut off any response Terra might have given. "But you are dead once that is finished."

"We shall see," Wily returned confidently.

"As amusing as all this is," Dr. Cossack interjected, "I'm going to have to cut things short."

And with that, Sunstar was coated with a gooey substance and fell as more globs of the stuff along with large explosive rockets rained down on the gathered forces followed by numerous two-legged machines that began attacking and sowing confusion.

"Cockroaches!" Roll sounded relieved, before noting the looks that had gotten. "Okay, so Dr. Cossack needs a better name for them, but they're on our side!"

And arriving with them was an orange robot on an Item-2 jet that was spraying the globs of goo and Auto on another with his home-made bazooka firing rockets like they were going out of style. (8) They adjusted and made for the two saucers, only to have both teleport

away. However, when Wily and his robot double reappeared, *another* robot riding an Item-2 jet attacked.

"Tempo!" Rock cheered the green-armored female robot sometimes known as Quake Woman as her Quake Drill destroyed Wily's robot double and sent the second saucer crashing to the ground. She, Auto, and the orange robot then made for the gathered heroes as Dr. Cossack landed his craft and exited with Eddie. The walking suitcase began dispensing E-Tanks for the robots while the opposing forces were lost in confusion.

"DLN-009 Bond Man reporting for duty!" the orange robot saluted as he stopped in front of Dr. Light. "Hostiles are shaken, not stirred."

"Good to see you up and about Bond Man," Dr. Light smiled. "We're thankful for the help."

"Yeah," Sonic agreed, "But we still need to do something about those Devil things. I think they're coming for us."

Sure enough, the Chaos Devil was advancing on the gathered heroes along with the Yellow and Green Devils.

"Don't worry," Auto thumped his chest with his free hand, "Me and Eddie got this one. Eddie! Super adapter!"

The flip-top suitcase chirped as the Lights blinked in astonishment and proceeded to combine... with the bazooka.

Auto then aimed the weapon at the Chaos Devil and pulled the trigger. "SHOTGUN FESTIVAL!"

A deluge of fireworks erupted from the weapon and proceeded to pound the Chaos Devil so hard and fast that it couldn't reform its body fast enough to protect the core. The shattered remains of the device landed a short ways away after the barrage died down and the water reformed into Chaos 0, who promptly thrust his arms into

the ground and caused a pair of water-spikes to pierce the Devil cores of the Yellow and Green Devils, taking them out as well.

"That was awesome!" several of Sonic's friends cheered the goofy green robot as Chaos 0 returned to their ranks and made its way over to Duo.

He was mad. He was furious. Everything had been going so well and then Mikhail had to show up and ruin it all.

"I am... glad to see you well..." Duo struggled to get out. Chaos merely looked back at him before flowing into the robot's wounds. Duo felt a surge of strength fill him as his damage was... patched and his faulty systems bypassed as his fellow guardian joined with him. Even forming a second giant fist over his smaller hand. "I see. Thank you for your aid, my friend. Let us see that Justice is served."

Sonic narrowed his eyes as Chaos joined his body to Duo's, however temporarily. The Cossack guy and Dr. Light were carrying Knux into the craft and off the battlefield, plus their enemies were getting their act back together pretty quickly. "Yeah, screw this. Everyone, if you've got something big in reserve, bring it out."

As if his words had opened the floodgates, his fellows began pulling out all the stops to win one last brawl for all the marbles.

The three Light siblings re-equipped their super adapters while their robotic allies stood ready and recharged. Blaze might still be burned out on her super mode from her previous transformation Burning Blaze, but Sonic could see she'd recovered enough to surround herself in a burning corona of flame as her friend Marine was summoning massive amounts of water to fight with. Tails was transforming the Tornado into the Mecha form he'd designed into after that trip to the Transformers' place. Amy hefted her best hammer, grinning. Cream and Rouge brought out the intelligent devices they'd gotten during their stint in Nanoha's Loop as Omega

cocked his many, many guns while thanking Rouge for access to exploding rounds. The Chaotix were whipping out the magic musical instruments that Vector had browbeaten him into forking over as payment before they'd been roboticized. Silver was apparently still cooling down from a previous super mode transformation, but he nonetheless began glowing with psychokinetic energy while Shade was prepping explosives. Even the Freedom Fighters were gearing up with battle suits Rotor had designed for them earlier this Loop. Big simply stood there and Shadow was... nowhere to be seen.

As for himself? He might still be on cooldown for his usual super form like three of his friends were, but he'd collected plenty of other methods of achieving a similar state over the Loops. He'd probably be regretting this later, especially after going werehog earlier as well, but some things were worth feeling like crap over afterwards.

The emotional energy of the World Rings swept over him as his blue spines darkened to purple. Darkspine Sonic lifted his head to glare with blank glowing eyes at the opposing army and he growled out the order that sent everyone charging forward.

"End this."

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: 7^%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

The musical instruments the Chaotix began to play were from those loops where music did things like bend the power of nature. With Espio on guitar, Ray on keys, Mighty on bass, Charmy on drums, and Vector on mike there was an epic storm brewing. (9)

The ground cracked, the sky split, the wind howled, and lightning crashed as the gathered forces of two Loops charged forward.

Darkspine Sonic took the lead with Tails in the Tornado mech, looking to take out the remaining Devil things. Rock and his pals might have tagged a few other things as bigger threats, but the Devil series was a collection of nasty pieces of work any way you cut it.

Too bad there were three of them left.

"Thunder Beam!"

"Time Slow!"

And then there was one less as the Block Devil suffered a bolt of lightning through it's eye for several seconds straight. Darkspine Sonic aimed for Ra Devil as Tails in the Tornado moved to engage Dark Moon.

"AAAAAAAHHHHH!" the purple hedgehog screamed in fury as he body slammed his opponent's single eye.

Duo unioned with Chaos, or Chaos Duo as some of his allies were already thinking of him, went straight for his ancient foe.

"You've seen better days my naive opponent," Slur taunted him.

"And yet my powers of Justice burn brighter than ever," Chaos Duo shot back. "You must know this battle is madness, Slur. Reality itself teeters on the edge of the abyss. None shall benefit if it tips the wrong way."

"Do you think me addled, little Duo?" Slur growled arrogantly. "Of course I know this. My senses are better than even yours in such matters, as they have always been. But what concern is it of mine if reality lives or dies? My place is to see that Evil is done, no matter the consequences. And there is much Evil to do here yet."

"Then we are at an impasse," Duo observed as he clenched both fists, his left beginning to glow the blue of Justice energy.

"Don't pretend to be surprised," Slur retorted as he clenched his own fists in response, his right taking on the dark purple hue of Evil energy. "Beings like us are incapable of change. We are absolutes."

"No," Duo retorted as both glowing fists flew forward to meet in an explosion of energy as the battlefield around them erupted in kind. "I am Justice!"

Amy took a calming breath, bracing herself and winding up with her hammer while waiting for her opponent to make the first move, just like she had learned from all those samurai movies she had watched as part of her self-control training.

Her opponent held his defense, not taking the bait.

"You may be patient, but you'll have to move eventually." she frowned, watching for an opening. Her response came in the form of clicks, beeps, and whistles, followed by a raspberry noise. Amy fought back a twitch. "I'll have you know I'm the very MODEL of patient! YOU'LL snap first!"

And so, Amy and Met Daddy began their standoff, ignoring the increasingly overpowered war surrounding them. (10)

Rock, Roll, and Blues scanned the battlefield as they weaved in and out of assaults and friendly fire alike. Their goal was simple: find and capture Dr. Wily and force him to end this war.

"Bwahahahahaha!" Auto laughed maniacally as he kept the trigger on his super Eddie bazooka depressed, causing it to unleash a steady stream of fireworks at a rate of fire worthy of a gatling gun. (11)

"Target acquired," Omega monotoned as he singled out the stardroid whose design was focused around armaments like his own.

"You dare to challenge Mars of the Stardroids?!" His opponent yelled back. "Then suffer defeat as I unleash the full power of an avatar of WAR!"

"Locked and loaded," Omega replied. "FIRE!"

A hail of glowing bullets that exploded on impact rained down on his opponent as high-yield missiles were launched right back.

"Taste defeat insignificant earth robot!"

"Worthless consumer model."

"You *DARE?!* "

Amy and Met Daddy continued their waiting game, sweat and coolant beading on their respective foreheads.

"… MOVE already!"

(Whistle click click beep!)

"Oh, REAL mature!"

"GRAAAAHHHHH!" Darkspine Sonic yelled as he pummeled the eye of Ra Devil without mercy. Rapid-fire punches led into rapid-fire kicks that left the mighty behemoth reeling and open for a final energized palm-strike that shattered the Devil Core.

Nearby, he could see Tails grappling with the other one before unleashing a laser from the tornado mech's chest straight through his opponent's own Devil Core.

"For Knuckles!" the two-tailed fox yelled.

Cut Man followed the Freedom Fighters as they wove amongst the chaos, blades flashing and weapons blazing.

Sunstar immolated two more of those annoying things that had been dropped to sow confusion amongst their ranks. The gunk he'd been doused with had been similarly annoying, but no match for his solar fire. So, the pitiful lifeforms wished to play it that way?

He would oblige and show them how such a game was *meant* to be played.

Sunstar stretched out his senses and felt the auras of the ones who opposed himself and the fool Wily. He felt for their power, but most of all he felt for that aura of a leader. The one whom all others answered to.

How interesting, there were quite a few, including that blue robot he remembered beginning to fight, but not how it ended. But among them one blazed brighter than any other.

How unfortunate for her.

Rock and his two siblings blasted into the center of the growing melee in their search for Dr. Wily. Every other opponent was to be ignored as much as possible and left to their allies to deal with. The faster they brought Wily down, the sooner this ended.

"There!" Blues shouted over the din, pointing his super adapter's sword at the mad scientist's saucer as it fired homing balls of energy in their direction.

The three dodged the attack, allowing it to impact the ground, and cursed as Wily's saucer teleported. The teleporting capsule trick might not be Wily's strongest creation, but it was easily one of the most annoying to fight.

Terra cursed vividly as he finally tore his way free of the gunk he'd been blindsided by. Whoever had done that would *suffer* .

"Well, if it ain't Terra the bully," a deep voice punctuated heavy approaching footsteps.

Terra turned to see one of the inferior earth robots standing over him, as tall as Uranus. Hmph. As if size alone determined power. He would be a suitable warm-up.

"I don't like bullies," Guts Man pounded his fists together. "That kinda thing ain't *manly* ."

The Freedom Fighters along with Cut Man had engaged the weaponized supercomputer CRORQ when they noticed someone missing.

"Where's Sally-girl?" Bunnie asked her companions.

Sally admittedly was having trouble standing. The one the others had called Sunstar had singled her out for some reason, and her knees were weak from his presence alone. (12)

"You. Your eyes are filled with fear. Your trembling screams that you have no confidence in your ability to fight me. Your body is soft and your skills are weak. And yet, you still join in the battle." he droned, glaring down at her and almost casually kicking her feet out from under her, knocking her on her back. Sally started backing away, but a boot planted firmly on her stomach easily winded her and held her still. "You struggle, knowing that fleeing is your only chance to survive. But why would you be here in the first place?" he continued, ignoring her pained gasps for breath as she strained to push his foot off of her. Sunstar's glare grew sharper. "I'll tell you why... because for some unfathomable reason, you are the so called 'heart' of the team, aren't you? Just BEING here makes the others forming the

body of the team fight harder. I do not know why a coward and weakling such as you was chosen, but I do know one thing."

He reached down, grabbed Sally by the neck, and lifted her to eye level, mere inches from him, ignoring her hands as she tried to pull his fingers away. "Kill the 'heart', and the 'body' swiftly follows. If I kill you, I kill everyone here. Consider yourself lucky. Your power is so far beneath my notice, that you should be mere ashes long before you register any pain."

With that, he wound up, and hurled Sally skyward, then surrounded himself in a fireball bright enough to be mistaken for a second sun, and launched himself upwards into a lethal tackle.

Cream had been unleashing Divine Busters on every target she could lock on to, when one actually managed to no-sell the blast. She stared as the largest of the Stardroids grunted in contempt and glared back.

"Foolish child," the bull-headed robot sneered. "I am Uranus! The toughest of the Stardroids! You think you can take ME?!"

The robot leapt into the air in her direction, causing the young rabbit to scramble out of the way as he crashed into the ground where she'd been, knocking several of his own nearby allies off their feet.

"Have at you!"

Blaze had noticed the robot of flames separate Sally from her group, and had tried to move to help. Certainly her control over fire could help tip the tide against another fire user, but she'd been intercepted by the robot called King.

"You have a regal bearing about you," the robot noted. "But you also move like a warrior. We shall do battle."

"Sorry," she refused, "but my friend needs me."

She tried to rush past him, only to barely dodge out of the way of an axe strike meant to take her head off.

"Your fight is here, with me," King told her sharply. "Forget that at your peril."

"Alright," Blaze hissed as flames ignited around her. "You want a fight, you've *got* one."

"Marvelous."

"No YOU move!"

(Beep click.)

"No, you!"

(Beep!)

"You!"

(Beep!)

"You!"

Darkspine Sonic twisted out of the way of the large energy blast his new opponent had thrown. He'd waved Tails on ahead to take some of the bigger contenders out while he dealt with the robot Rock had called Ra Thor.

The dude didn't have anything in the way of personality – he might as well have tried taunting a wall – but he had power to spare. This could take a few seconds...

The cockroach robots Dr. Cossack had dropped earlier had thinned considerably, but what remained skittered about the battlefield and harassed all enemy combatants in range.

"Hahahaha! With this storm, Jupiter reigns supreme!" the electrically powered member of the Stardroids declared as the lightning generated by the Chaotix's battle concert crashed around him. "You fools have sealed your do–"

Something latched on to his chest and began beeping.

"Eh?" he inquired intelligently as he looked down to see a digital countdown timer on his torso.

Shade nodded firmly as the explosion of one of her biggest bombs, special from Rotor, bloomed overhead. Now to take out these drones that were swarming her.

"You think you can take me?" the brown Stardroid brandished his ring at the arrogant earth robot. "I, who controls the mighty force of gravity?"

"You gonna just stand there and posture, Saturn?" Elec Man smirked as he was struck by lightning and focused the energy into the space between his hands. "Or are you going to bring it?"

"Tracking Wily's movements now!" Blues called out as he cut through one of the Dark Man in his charge across the battlefield.

"Roger that!" his siblings confirmed as they followed their older brother.

The squad of Fake Men was obliterated as Quake Woman led three of Light's robot masters; Bomb Man, Time Man, and Bond Man;

along with Big the Cat straight through it and selected the group's next target.

"Ain't you blokes ever heard of a fair fight?" Marine complained as her hydrokinetic powers were taxed to their limit countering her opponents' weapons.

"No," the yellow sideways-walking Stardroid returned bluntly as he fired off more of his exploding bubbles. "Have you, Neptune?"

"It is a concept invented by lesser beings to excuse their weakness, Venus," his fish-man themed companion grunted condescendingly as he continued to blast a torrent of corrosively saturated water at the raccoon.

"Your designated feminine predecessor imprint was a sub-standard model, and ran Windows Vista." (13)

"I'LL DANCE ON YOUR BROKEN BODY!"

"Unhand me sub-creature!" the furred Stardroid struggled against the telekinetic field that held him. "Pluto demands it!"

"Yeah," Silver sweated as he continued to restrain the frothing robot. This was a lot harder than he was used to. "Not happening."

Amy's shoulders were starting to get stiff.

"Yeah, I know the feeling. Only really able to do one thing, but someone more experienced already does it better. It sucks, doesn't it?"

(Click whistle click beep beep...) Met Daddy sighed sadly.

"We'll, can't let it get you down. Maybe you could get an upgrade? Mine did wonders for me."

(Whistle beep click click?)

"Nope, still not moving."

(Click beep!)

"No YOU move first!"

(Beep!)

"You!"

(BEEP!)

The Loops had a near infinite number of variables, but there were some constants. Some very strange constants to be sure, but constants nonetheless.

Sooner or later, everyone ended up in Eiken at least once. Similarly, everyone had a fused Loop in Hogwarts. If you were normally female, you ended up being a magical girl at some point. No matter your baseline, it would eventually be done In Space. Everyone flipped genders at times. *Everyone.*

And anything feline in the Loops eventually crossed paths with Ranma Saotome.

Thus it was to King's surprise that Blaze was no slouch at all in unarmed combat. Her personal neko-ken style fire claws had scored his armor and broken his axe.

"You are a worthy opponent," he declared. "In another life, I could respect you. Perhaps we could even have been allies."

He stood upright, and two flashes of light flared behind him, revealing the purple – actually more indigo up close – armored vehicles that had appeared with him at the beginning. Apparently they had been engaged elsewhere on the battlefield, but King had now recalled them.

"But my father has ordered your death," he declared, his armor turning purple as his wounds healed and the machines behind him docked together to make a single mecha.

Blaze quickly went on the attack to take him out before he healed fully and took control of the giant machine, but he teleported himself straight into the cockpit.

"Nothing personal, you understand," the self-styled royal declared as his machine powered up. "But I'm afraid that Jet King Robo is beyond even your power."

Blaze glared up at her opponent and produce an aura of flames in response.

"Not bad!" Guts Man admitted, numerous scorch marks in his armor from where he'd been pelted with his opponent's laser weapon. "But I'm built for heavy duty work. You wanna get through *my* armor..."

"Fall damn you!" Terra cursed as the robot advanced heedless of the damage he was taking and sunk his fist into Terra's gut. The field leader of the Stardroids' eyes went wide as he was lifted bodily off the ground.

"Yer gonna need more PUNCH!"

"Above!" Blues signaled an instant before Wily's saucer appeared in that very spot. All three fired as they dodged the craft's energy blasts, causing the craft to shudder before vanishing again.

Sally's life was racing before her eyes, even as tears leaked out of them as she flew through the air. She felt no shame in admitting that she felt more fear under the gaze of Sunstar than she ever had before. Robotnik, Ixis Naugus, the Dark Legion, the Iron Queen, all had toyed with her, and she had survived. But Sunstar was going straight for the kill and seemed bored about it! The only time she had ever felt so helpless before was the time Nicole had gone rouge. Even when being turned into Mecha Sally, she had made her peace with the world as it happened. But now, as Sunstar charged at her, cloaked in flames not even Blaze could hope to ever control, almost in slow motion to her eyes, she was going to die.

And then in their shock, so was everyone else.

Frantically viewing her life for SOME sense of closure in all this, she saw certain cherished memories in her mind's eye.

The first time she had met Sonic. Even despite her despair, she couldn't help but giggle softly. *'My hair. What was I thinking back then?'*

The time before Robotnik. *'It all seems so long ago...'*

Saving her father from the Zone of Silence. *'He was so weak. The crown was still mine to bear, for better or for worse.'*

The return of her brother. *'I had nearly forgotten him...'*

Her very first loop reset. *'I was so confused... what was it Tails said again?'* she pondered, thinking back.

"Aunt Sally..." he had said. "You know already that we live in a multiverse. The Zones are proof enough of that. But what you don't know, is that it's so much bigger than anyone could have guessed without seeing the entire scope for themselves. The loops grant a sort of immortality. When you die, you just reset. But... Aunt Sally, somewhere out there is a universe that's only going to get one shot. If that universe dies, who knows the damage it could do to the

system as a whole? We can help them. But it will put us as risk as well. We're going to need everyone for this. You most of all. Because even after all the rest of us have experienced... You're still our leader for a reason. We need you for this. Everyone and everything that ever existed and ever will may ride on us. And we can't do it without you."

'Tails... he's been through things like this before. He's probably died *before. And he's still fighting. My god, it only just hit me, he's seen so much... become so wise, and he still believes in me. I owe it to him, to everyone, to fight, not run. But... what can* I *do?'* she wondered.

As if in response, another memory flashed before her eyes. That of a pool of seemingly molten gold filled with stars. And as she recalled it, her eyes changed to match it.

Thus, Sunstar was understandably shocked when the weakling he had been poised to kill lashed out with one hand, snatching his own and halting him dead in the air, completely ignoring his flames.

Rouge was running through her blaster bits pretty fast as the battle progressed. She'd need to stock back up the next chance she got.

Without warning, a barrage of strange energy blasts connected and seemed to pass straight through her. Stunned and startled, she fell to the ground and saw the blasts curving back around and carrying...

" *This* is what you deem the most important of what you hold?" the lime green figure sneered as his arm turned into an amorphous mass and proceeded to engulf and crush most of the gemstones she'd stolen from Jewel Man during the earlier battle. The same ones that had just been re-stolen by his strange energy blasts. "Worthless crystalline garbage. You have wasted my time, and Mercury does not forgive those who waste his time."

" *You...* " Rouge saw red. To steal her precious gems and then declare them worthless?! Who did this robot think he was?! "Jeweled

Heart!"

Understood.

Rouge forgot all about conserving her ammunition as she fired off all six cartridges in her intelligent device at once.

"STARLIGHT BREAKER!" she yelled as multiple bolts of pink energy erupted from her device and converged on the robot who'd dared to steal from her and then destroy her precious gems.

"Oh–" was all Mercury managed to get out as the blast hit and carved a trench into the ground and through the battlefield behind him.

Tails blinked as the mechanical dragon he was fighting was blown apart by a rogue starlight breaker.

"Huh. That was lucky."

Cream yelled in pain as she was hit with a stone thrown by her opponent and fell to the ground clutching her leg.

"Chao!" Cheese cried worriedly before being backhanded away by Uranus.

"Pathetic," the Stardroid scoffed. "To think this is the best warrior that could be sent aga–

He was interrupted by a blob of black sludge hitting him in the face.

"Hey, man, hands off the little lady!" Oil Man slid along the shifting ground at high speed and body-checked Uranus into a convenient fissure opened by the combination of his own stomping and the Chaotix's magic music.

Fire and Ice slammed into Pluto from both sides, causing the Stardroid to cry out in pain.

Silver took the opening that was provided him and blasted his opponent with a psychic bolt that sent him flying into Mechazaurus.

Nodding respectfully to Fire Man and Ice Man, he proceeded to join them in unleashing a hail of energy on both targets.

"Look, I said I was sorry. Can we just drop it with the insults?"

(Whistle click click. Thwbtt!)

"I'm TRYING to be the bigger person here!"

(Beep click HONK!)

Amy's eyes became shadowed under her brow. "Did you. Just. Call. Me. Fat?" she growled.

(HONK! HONK!)

Right, screw self control, this creep was going down. "Tendo style: ..." she snarled, hefting her hammer and exploding foreword with unnatural speed. "BAKA! BAKA! BAKA! BAKA! BAKA! BAKA! BAKA!" she yelled, smashing her hammer against Met Daddy's hat over and over as he huddled.

Wily's saucer reappeared over the battlefield and fired at the trio of adversaries that hounded it, only for the shots to dissipate as they hit Proto Man's shield.

The combination of Proto Man's sword strike and the rocket fists/claws from Mega Man and Mega Woman rocked the craft before it vanished once more.

'Finally! ' Darkspine Sonic growled mentally as Ra Thor went down. He'd needed to dip into his ring reserve to keep the form going after a lucky hit and he was getting closer than he'd like to extending the duration past what it was meant to undergo in the first place.

'Consequences are for later,' he berated himself. *'Take care of the problem now so that there'll actually* be *a later.'*

Blaze panted from exertion as Jet King Robo finally exploded from her pyrokinetic assault and threw a wave to the where the doctors were providing support fire in the moth-like craft.

Shade cursed the existence of the Weapons Archive drones as she dodged a blast of ice from the latest one. It was impossible to tell what weapon they were armed with before they attacked.

"Apollo, Luna," Dr. Light sighed as he targeted the leaders of the Constellation Droids from inside Dr. Cossack's craft, "you deserved better than to be dragged into another of Wily's mad schemes."

Tails had to hand it to the met piloting Metonger Z as he unleashed a barrage of weapons fire from the Tornado. It was pretty skilled for a generic minion.

"You... you would DARE–!"

A solid kick to the jaw shut Sunstar up, knocking him away.

Skidding to a stop in the air, he glared at the lesser being that dared to strike him.

"You would destroy countless out of petty bloodlust and the mother of all superiority complexes!" Sally growled, floating in

mid-air as wind started whipping around her into a cyclone, golden motes of light filling her fist and surrounding her brow, seemingly merging with one-another one by one.

"SILENCE! You know nothing! I was created to kill, and so I shall! All inferior to me shall die, and ALL are inferior to me!" he snapped, waving an arm and clenching his fists. "It is my right!"

"NONE have that right! Least of all one who demands that he does! By MY right, as a s-serv...en... as an EXTENT...tion... as... as..." she groaned, holding her head and struggling with herself. **"As... WIELDER... of the All... I declare All to have judged you... and found you lacking!"** she finally managed to growl as a bead of golden sweat ran down her face. **"And as you have been Judged... I now deliver JUDGEMENT!"**

Through sheer force of will, the motes of light around her vanished, revealing the Ring of Acorns atop her head, and the Sword of Acorns clenched tightly in her fist. Winding up with the sword, she swung it before her in an overhand chop. **"You who would deny others life, thy punishment shall fit the crime!"**

And Sunstar felt something inside himself snap.

A bright flash of light and an immense explosion larger than the Wily Egg bloomed high above the battlefield.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: J9%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

"Almost there..." Hephaestus coded furiously. He just about had the parameters fixed.

"So, one of you pieces of trash took down Sunstar?" Terra glowered as he got to his feet. "That's the last mistake you will ever make."

"Kiss my steel-plated fists," the scorched and dented Guts Man returned.

Sally panted heavily for breath, arms trembling as she floated in the air, even as the wind died down, and the sword and ring turned to dust around her, her eyes flickering back to normal every few seconds.

"If... if someone could catch me now... that would... be great." she whispered, right before her eyes rolled back in her head.

And she fell.

Bunnie and Rotor took aim as Antoine covered them before firing at their targets.

Bunnie's charged and focused laser punched straight through Neptune's armor and Rotor's rocket launcher blasted Venus fifty feet across the stone ground before the Stardroid was struck by lightning.

"Thanks mates!" Marine called out as she psychically heaved the weaponized water they'd been assaulting her with over her head towards the firefight between Omega and his own opponent.

"HA!" Mars gloated as one of his missiles blew Omega's arm off. "NOW YOU PERISH!"

"You first," the strongest of the E-series monotoned as a deluge of corrosive liquid engulfed the enemy war machine.

Darkspine Sonic had felt Sally tap into... whatever way up above the battlefield for a short time before it faded out with the explosion, having only hung on long enough to guard her from the blast.

He saw her falling and without a second thought drew deeper upon the power of his current form to fly up and catch her.

He caught her easily enough about halfway down and watched as she stirred from unconsciousness as they began descending again.

"Hey, Sal," he said as tenderly as possible for his current form. **"Welcome to the super club."**

The three siblings fired on the Wily Saucer from all sides when it reappeared next, causing something in the craft to blow out and start smoking.

"Heh. That all your 'manliness' is worth?" Terra gloated over his damaged opponent. He'd taken a few solid hits, more than he'd care to admit to, but the superiority of his heritage had won out again.

"Nope," the critically damaged, but still not dead, Guts Man shot back. He'd taken the worst this bully could dish out and he was still standing. He could barely move, mind you, but he was still standing. "Sometimes being manly means knowing when to call for backup."

As if someone had been waiting for a cue, a pair of whirling blades arced forth from behind the larger robot and curved towards the Stardroid.

Terra laughed as he shot the blades out of the air. "Your backup is even weaker than you are! Let's see how long they last when not using your worthless corpse as a shield!"

Terra was prepared when more blades came around his opponent and he confidently fired his Spark Chaser at them again. He wasn't

prepared for the blade thrower himself to dash between the larger robot's legs and into melee range that same instant. Before he could properly readjust his aim and compensate for how much faster this new opponent was than the larger foe, the orange and white robot had sprung up, blade in hand, straight for his throat.

" *No one* ," Cut Man glared as Terra collapsed clutching his sparking neck, "hurts my friends."

Darkspine Sonic grunted from atop the smoking ruin of HannyaNED² that he'd used to cushion his and Sal's landing and looked around the battlefield. The ranks of Wily's last ditch army were almost completely gone and it looked like Rock and his siblings were about to bring Wily down too.

He sighed as he finally released the transformation and returned to his usual self before setting Sally on her feet, only to take a blow to the back immediately afterwards.

"The Dark Man shall reign supre–"

CRUNCH

The Chaotix hit the last note of their mystical battle ballade as the Light siblings' shots impacted the Wily Saucer one last time, causing it to spin out of control and come crashing to the ground. The hatch popped open as the craft impacted and Dr. Wily himself spilled out onto the war-torn ground.

Sonic extracted himself from the trench he'd made when the last remaining Dark Man had gotten a cheap shot off. Too bad for the bot he'd been standing right where Tails in the Tornado had landed.

Though considering how Sal glared at the bot's remains, that may have been the preferable option.

"Looks like that's that," Sonic dusted himself off as Tails tossed him a bottle of water from the Tornado's cooler.

"Yep," Tails agreed, taking a swig from his own bottle as everyone converged around the defeated scientist. Everyone except...

"Hey, has anyone seen Amy?" Rotor asked as Bunnie began worrying over Sally. (14)

"–BAKA! BAKA! BAKA! BAKA! BAKA! BAKA! BAKA!–" Amy raged as she continued to drive the source of her anger into the ground like a tent peg.

Met Daddy sweatdropped, not daring to lift its hat for an instant. Maybe it had gone a little far... It took a moment to inspect its surroundings. The hole it was in must be at least seven feet deep by now. 'Yes,' it decided, 'just a bit too far.'

"Eh," Sonic shrugged, "I'm sure she's okay. Amy's a tough gal." *'And a scary one,'* he thought to himself.

As the group approached where the Light siblings had Dr. Wily surrounded, they could see the doctor... begging forgiveness?

"Wow," Silver deadpanned, "such self-respect."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" the defeated Dr. Wily apologized on his hands and knees in front of the Light siblings and their now-disengaged support units. "Please find it in your heart to forgive an old man his mistakes!"

"Rock," Blues placed a hand on his brother's shoulder, halting him from going forward.

Rock blinked as data was transmitted, and then his eyes hardened and he turned to glare at Dr. Wily.

"Rock?" Roll asked her brother worriedly, only to receive a the same data transmission herself, causing her eyes to harden as well.

Rock strode purposefully up to the man and dragged him upright by his shirt.

"Please Mega Man!" Wily sobbed. "I can change! I can make the world a bet–"

Dr. Wily was cut off when Mega Man backhanded his head off...

"Dude!"

...where it proceeded to bounce up and down on the connected spring. (15)

"What in...?"

"Hahahahaha!" the robot double of Wily laughed as its face flipped around. "Par–"

A psychokinetic aura silenced the fake and flung it high into the air where a barrage of weapons fire obliterated it.

"Okay..." Tails tried to get his heart rate back under control. That has been way too close. "If that's not Dr. Wily, then where is he?"

"Right here, you ignorant fools!" boomed the voice of Wily, coming straight from the Wily Egg that still hovered overhead.

Hephaestus swore as his repair attempts generated another error message. He was so *close* !

A massive holographic image of Dr. Wily in a command center was projected overhead in such a way that the madly grinning face of the doctor leered down at them all.

"You lot may have destroyed the Genesis Wave device and stopped the further generation of chaos energy," the man declared, "but the Wily Egg has more than enough stored chaos energy to destroy you all many times over!"

Dr. Wily began cackling madly as an object trailing light blue and dark purple energy impacted nearby. Chaos Duo emerged looking as if he'd seen better days, the union of Chaos 0 clearly the only thing allowing the space robot to retain movement, and limped over to the group.

"And that is if you were still at full strength!" Wily laughed as a door behind him slid open and allowed Metal Sonic to enter. "And of course, there's still my newest ally! How go things, Metal Sonic?"

"Everything goes according to plan, doctor," the robot hedgehog intoned.

"Excellent!" the mad doctor proclaimed as Eggman's creation moved to stand behind him and to the side.

"My plan, that is," Metal Sonic suddenly placed his hand atop Dr. Wily's head in an iron grip.

"Wh–urk..." Wily twitched as the robot's claws suddenly extended into his head.

"Cerebral download commencing," Metal Sonic's eyes glowed sinisterly as those below watched in growing horror.

"Come on... come on..." the god of the forge urged the coding displayed on his terminal. " *Work* already..."

"Did..." Rock choked in disbelief. "Did he just...?"

"I think he *did* ..." Sonic looked slightly green.

"Cerebral download complete," Metal Sonic declared, retracting his claws and letting Wily's lifeless body collapse to the floor. "I have surpassed all limitations."

Metal Sonic put his hands on the console and both deformed as cables connected the robot betrayer directly to the battlestation.

" *I* am now the ultimate lifeform," Metal Sonic declared as the integration proceeded. "I have surpassed Eggman. I have surpassed Sonic. I have surpassed Mega Man. I have surpassed Wil–"

Waltz beat her head against the wall again in what would seem to anyone else to be a pointless gesture.

"How *dare* you beg her for mercy!" she yelled at herself as she continued the self-torture. "You're nothing more than a barely formed idea! Cast aside and forgotten! You're too weak to deserve existence! *I'm* Waltz! *I'm* the instrument of torment and death! *You're* just a pathetic mewling little weakling who should stay in the back of *my* mind and watch helplessly as *I* reduce the world to pain and suffering!"

She didn't notice the machinery of the room come alive until it began to assimilate her into the rest.

"So that's how it's going, eh?" she grinned insanely as the machines reached for her mind. "Take it! Take it all! Just make them suffer! Make them *all* suff–*"

"–*skrrrk-k-k-k*" Metal Sonic's eyes glitched suddenly and went dark, only to come back online a moment later. Except blue.

"Heh-he-he-he-he!" Metal Sonic began to chuckle in a voice not his own. "HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The weary and battered heroes watched as the Wily Egg began to twist and change.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The hologram had cut out, but the laughter continued as if the Wily Egg itself was the one laughing.

"Done!" Hephaestus declared as he pressed 'enter' on his terminal.

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS: ZX%

DATA CORRUPTION ERROR.

RECALCULATING...

Hephaestus twitched.

"STABILIZE ALREADY DAMN YOU!" he yelled as he slammed his fists into his terminal in frustrated fury, causing the display to waver.

"SUCCESS!" the voice from the Wily Egg boomed as the battlestation began unfolding like a transformer.

"I AM IMMORTAL!" the twisting machinery began to form arms and legs and the skull plate slid up to the general location of the head.

"I AM SUPREME!" The twisting machinery finished the hands and feet as the behemoth smashed the heads of the doctor's statues and straddled the crater as it loomed over them.

"I AM THE GREATEST GENIUS OF ALL TIME!" the voice declared as metal formed on the side of the head in mimicry of a very

distinctive hair style.

Hephaestus's terminal had been idle for a few long moments after the display returned to normal before displaying the line he wanted to see.

SCENARIO PARAMETERS STABLE.

CALCULATION COMPLETE.

"TREMBLE BEFORE THE POWER OF–"

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS:

" *–METAL WILY!* "

0.0001%

---

1) Sonic Speed in case you readers were wondering. Utility-class weapon, Rock's favorite kind.

2) This fight by Jcogginsa. Elec Man may be a hero, but he's still got something of an ego on him.

3) Oil Man is vulnerable to flames. There are over a dozen fire-based master weapons in the classic series. It really sucks to be him sometimes.

4) Just to illustrate how nuts Grenade Man is, here's a fellow bomb-loving pyromaniac with the official statement. Bomb Man loves to blow stuff up. Grenade Man likes to be blown up.

5) Begin reaction command sequence.

6) Elec Man knows how to deal with electronic explosive devices.

7) Sunstar is one of the only foes to ever oust Wily as the final boss in the classic series. He's... not someone you really control.

8) Which assumes anything Auto designs has ever been *in* style.

9) Insert your favorite epic battle rock ballade here.

10) Amy vs Met Daddy portions by masterofgames.

11) Let's pray Auto and looping Trixie never meet...

12) Sally vs Sunstar also by masterofgames.

13) You can blame or thank masterofgames for this insult, whichever you prefer.

14) This portion is adjusted from/inspired by an interlude in the Amy Tendo vs Metma Saotome battle by masterofgames. He's been a big help with this melee.

15) Who actually thought I'd end the Loop without pulling this classic?

Oh, snap. How will the group get out of this? Stay tuned for the conclusion!

Loop 1 Part 7: Online

Mega Loop 1.0 Part 7: Online.

Last time, on Mega Loop 1.0:

"TREMBLE BEFORE THE POWER OF–"

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS:

" *–METAL WILY!* "

0.0001%

And now, the conclusion:

..

'No...' Hephaestus stared at his terminal in despair.

"Maybe we could summon Godzilla?" Charmy suggested.

"Which one?" Vector snarked. "The one that comes up to his shin or the one that comes up to his knee?"

"No..." Hephaestus tried to deny the reality in front of him.

"Just a moment more, Thomas," Dr. Cossack told his comrade. "I've almost managed to wrest control of his fleet, so we should have a figh–"

Two beams from the metal behemoth's eyes lanced out across the sky, and a series of explosions were heard in the distance as whatever crafts left aloft in the Egg-Wily fleet were obliterated.

"Well..." Dr. Light trembled as he typed away at his portion of the controls. "Maybe we can hack the Wily Egg directly and shut it do–"

The good scientists both had to jump back as the console shorted and sparked dangerously the moment a connection was made. The craft lurched sharply and would have crashed if not for Silver's telekinesis.

"Oh, Tartarus..." Hermes breathed in shock. "What if we–?"

"Divine intervention's accounted for in the calculations," Hephaestus shook his head.

"Tails?" Sonic asked his long-time sidekick, partner, and friend as the doctors were attempting their own solution. "You still got a good stockpile of rings tucked away? Enough for those alternate kinda-unstable super forms we sometimes use?"

"Yeah, Sonic," Tails ejected himself from the Tornado in preparation.

"Good, we're going in hot," Sonic told his pal as he drew on his own immense stockpile as well. It wasn't a good idea due to the three empowered transformations he'd done already, but they were officially out of options.

At the same time Metal Wily made his shot on the compromised fleet, they made their move. Hyper Tails with his super flicky familiars

and Ultra Sonic surrounded by black stars rocketed into the air towards their massive opponent.

The eye-lasers locked on to them next, but Ultra Sonic and Hyper Tails managed to block them with the powers inherent to their forms.

"Let's see how you lik–ng!" Ultra Sonic suddenly stumbled woozily in mid-air. (1)

"Sonic?" Hyper Tails called to his friend worriedly.

"I'm fine, buddy," Ultra Sonic reassured him. "Just a little ligh–"

The distraction had been enough to allow Metal Wily to bring his massive hands to either side of the pair and unleash an energy field so intense that nothing else could be heard over it. When it was released, the metal arms were smoking from shorts and blown fuses, and the once-again ordinary forms of Sonic and Tails were falling limply.

"Then that's... That's game, isn't it?" Hermes observed despondently.

Hephaestus found himself nodding mechanically. Yggdrasil never declared impossibility nor certainty due to the sheer number of variables in any situation, but that was the lowest non-zero odds it was capable of calculating in its current state.

It was as good as a death sentence.

Silver managed to catch Sonic and Tails as well while Metal Wily gloated.

"FINALLY!" he boomed. **"I'VE WON! IT TOOK MORE POWER THAN I ANTICIPATED, BUT EVERY FORCE YOU HAVE CAPABLE OF BESTING ME HAS BEEN NULLIFIED!"**

Blaze cursed under her breath. She was still recovering from being forcibly knocked out of her own super form earlier. It would be at least a few minutes before she could do it again. Minutes they simply didn't have.

Silver sympathized. He didn't quite understand how he'd pulled off the trick with the Time Stones earlier, but even if he wasn't cooling down from the transformation he could feel the restrictions on their use back in place.

"AND EVEN IF YOU HAVE ANY MORE SURPRISES LEFT IN RESERVE, I CAN DESTROY YOU ALL BEFORE YOU CAN USE THEM!"

"Rock?" Roll asked her brother. "You got any ideas?"

"Yeah," he replied, "but even putting it in active weapon memory, I have no idea how to get Top Spin up to sufficient velocity with our current resources."

"FAREWELL," Metal Wily laughed, **"IT HAS BEEN... ENTERTAINING. 5... 4..."**

"We need a miracle," the god of the forge stated, "and I'm fresh out."

He turned to look sadly at his terminal, determined to at least see this through to the end, and noticed something...

"Not so fast, 'pops'," a voice cut the tableau.

CALCULATION ERROR: VARIABLE UNACCOUNTED FOR DUE TO JARRED TERMINAL.

Hephaestus stared at the screen before him incredulously. "Are you telling me that you made a mistake because I hit you?!"

AFFIRMATIVE. (2)

RECALCULATING...

"...BASS?" Metal Wily halted his countdown out of confusion as he spotted the black-armored robot, once again unioned with Treble for some reason, standing next to Shadow. **"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"**

"Wondering why I ever wanted to be your son!" Bass yelled back as he crushed an empty E-Tank in anger. "You say that I'm your greatest creation! Your foremost pride! And then you treat me like garbage! I remember everything!"

"IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK!" Metal Wily insisted.

"You brainwashed me!" Bass bellowed back in fury. "And then you threw me aside so you could play giant robot!"

"You're through doctor," Shadow the Hedgehog declared as he produced seven gems from seemingly nowhere.

The Chaos Emeralds.

"SO..." Metal Wily rumbled. **"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO TOOK THE EMERALDS..."**

"And the one who saved your son from being consumed by your new body," Shadow retorted as the emeralds whirled around both he and Bass.

"..." Metal Wily paused at that fact long enough for the transformation to finalize, revealing the pale gold forms of Super Shadow and Super Bass hovering in mid-air.

"Your doom is at hand doctor," Super Shadow declared confidently.

"I THINK NOT!" Metal Wily shot his potent eye-lasers again at the two.

"CHAOS REFLECTION!" Super Shadow yelled and formed a barrier against the assault. The powerful energy beams struck the barrier and were each deflected right back through the other eye.

"So that's how it is..." Super Bass growled.

"CHAOS BIND!" Super Shadow declared, energy enveloping the self-proclaimed Metal Wily, freezing the mechanical behemoth in place.

"You think you can get away with changing my history?" Super Bass growled as he formed both arms into cannons and began charging up. "My memories? You think you can reprogram my brain?! And then you think you can try to *kill* me and I'd actually be okay with it?!"

The energy Bass was accumulating began to grow blinding.

"YOU WANT A BLINDLY LOYAL WEAPON?! YOU WANT A SOLDIER WHO NEVER QUESTIONS?! YOU WANT A MINDLESSLY OBEDIENT SON WHO WILL LAY DOWN AND DIE FOR YOU?!"

"Will you *shoot* him already?" Super Shadow grunted as he strained to hold their foe in place.

VARIABLE ACCOUNTED FOR.

"YOU–"

CALCULATION COMPLETE.

"–CAN KISS–"

CHANCE OF LOOP ACTIVATION SUCCESS:

"–MY–"

99.9999%

" *–DOUBLE BASS CANNON!* "

The energy Bass had been building up erupted from his busters and blew a hole in the metal behemoth's lower torso so wide as to nearly bisect it.

"BASS... YOU..." Metal Wily gasped in disbelief.

The remaining structure proved unable to support the upper half of Metal Wily and easily buckled under the weight. The upper half of Metal Wily toppled forward right at the gathered heroes as Super Bass's form faded from the energy output it had just produced.

"CHAOS CONTROL!" Super Shadow yelled right before it hit.

The relieved cheers of two grown deities could be easily heard in the outer office.

The entire combined forces of two Loops reappeared many miles away from the mountain and watched as the remains of Metal Wily finished falling into the crater before erupting in a skull-shaped mushroom cloud.

"–BAKA!–?" a confused Amy looked around the spot her hammer had cratered the ground instead of her unusually resiliant opponent.

Shadow smirked as he dispelled his super mode and turned to his fellow anti-social savior. "Shouldn't that have been your 'super' double bass cannon?"

"Bite me, hedgehog," Bass growled.

"Not my type," Shadow grinned as he casually walked back to his allies.

"Dr. Lalinde?" the voice of Dr. Cossack came over the dimensional communicator. "We're ready for a return portal. I'm activating the beacon now."

"Well, I think that's a wrap," Hermes grinned cheerfully as the battle finished. "I'm gonna double-check my firewall on Wily and then I'm headed back to my office. I'd say let's do this again sometime, but I don't think this many heart attacks is good for my health."

"Thank you for your help, brother," Hephaestus told the god of travel.

Hermes blinked for a second, surprised. Sure they were brothers, or at least half-brothers, but Hephaestus didn't particularly like acknowledging anything that connected him to his parents. Thus the gesture... actually meant quite a bit coming from him.

"Anytime," Hermes replied, before deciding to tease the god of the forge a bit. "So long as your credit's good at least."

"Oh, Shadow!" Rouge gushed to the black hedgehog's discomfort as the group exited the portal and entered the lab. "You were so *dashing* ! Why, it's enough to make a girl... *excited* ..."

"Would you stop that?" Shadow attempted to put some more distance between them.

"Oh, but Shadow..." Rouge giggled impishly as she followed him. He was so *fun* to tease...

"Hmm..." Amy mused as she watched the two. "Not bad. I'll give her technique an 8.1."

"Mission successful, mother," Quake Woman declared as she dismissed her armor and returned to her civilian identity as Tempo.

"Excellent work, daughter, I'm proud of you," Dr. Lalinde told the robot girl before turning to the russian scientist in the group. "I got a call from your lab Mikhail. Apparently when the world went back to normal your robot masters reappeared there as if nothing was wrong and your daughter was curious as to where you disappeared to. I'm not entirely sure why I'm unaffected, but I suspect it has to do with my proximity to the open portals we used."

"Thank you, Noel," Dr. Cossack made his way over to the communications terminal. "It would be interesting to study, but I sincerely hope that we never get the chance for repeat observations of this phenomena."

The monitor sprang to life, showing a young blond girl. "Poppa!"

"Hello Kalinka," Dr. Cossack smiled warmly. "Sorry to worry you darling."

"Hey, Sal," Sonic grinned as Rouge managed to gigglingly latch onto Shadow in a deliberate parody of adoration. Bunnie and Antoine had staked out a nearby corner and were passionately kissing in relief that the ordeal was over. "Those four give you any ideas?"

"They tell me you could use a cold shower," the princess smirked.

"Ouch, Sal," Sonic winced as several of his friends laughed. "That's harsh."

Off to the side, Dr. Light was hooking Duo up to a regeneration pod so he could recover after Chaos 0 separated from him.

In the general confusion, Roll noticed Bass and Treble slipping away and followed them.

"And where do you think you're going?" Bass heard the voice of Mega Woman... Roll... behind him as he exited the lab.

"Home," Bass told her. "Or anywhere that isn't here really."

"You could stay," she offered.

"Yeah... Not happening," the black-armored robot dismissed.

"Bass... you saved our lives," Roll told him. "Our worlds. Possibly all of reality."

"So what?" the son of Wily growled and turned on her. "Not like it changes any–mph?!"

Bass had been cut off as Roll closed the distance between them and grabbed him in a kiss.

"..." the anti-hero stared as the girl he'd been crushing on in one set of memories and trying to just plain crush in the other broke the kiss and stepped back. He thought he could hear Treble *laughing* at him. "Habba?"

"Oh, give me *some* credit, Bass," Roll put a hand on her hip and glared at him. "You're not exactly a subtle suitor. You've been after me since before the Evil Energy thing but I wasn't really sure if I wanted to give you a shot. But you just saved the universe in general

and my family in particular. If *that* isn't enough to earn you a chance, *nothing* is."

"What?" Bass tried to reboot his processor.

"I gotta spell it out for you?" Roll smirked in amusement. "You are taking me out on a date. Tomorrow, noon sharp. You *will* be wearing appropriate civilian attire instead of your battle armor. Preferably something that won't make blind men tear their eyes out either."

Bass continued staring as the daughter of Light sauntered back inside. It took him a few minutes to realize that Rock, out of his Mega Man armor no less, was standing next to the door giving him a level gaze.

"What do you want?"

"Just to remind you of something," the tool-user turned living weapon replied levelly. "I may be a fighting robot, but I was originally made for the express purpose of aiding my father in the lab. Use of tools comes naturally to me. As does the maintenance, repair, assembly, and disassembly of machines."

"So?" Bass challenged.

"So if you break my sister's heart, *I will take you apart and spread you out across the spare parts bins all over the city* ," Rock replied coldly.

Bass gulped despite himself as his eternal rival stepped back through the door. He'd *never* seen Rock in scary mode before. He wasn't really sure he ever wanted to again.

"Oh, good, Rock did the traditional brother death threat already," another voice spoke behind him. Bass whirled around, arm cannon ready, only to have it blocked by a familiar white ovular shield with a red border while the shield's owner's finger tapped his forehead mockingly.

He could *definitely* hear Treble laughing now.

"You should be flattered," Proto Man smirked. "He's been practicing that routine for months in case Roll ever decided to give you a shot."

"And what about you?" Bass glared.

"You mean, what's my threat? How I'd get revenge if you hurt my little sister?" Blues returned smugly. "You assume Roll would leave anything to get revenge *on* . But let's say she *did* ..."

Bass watched as Blues's smirk turned downright evil.

"You'd never see me coming." (3)

Bass stood there gaping as Blues strolled back in with the others before turning to a chortling Treble.

"You know you're the only one I let get away with that," Bass rubbed Treble's head affectionately as the two walked away from the lab.

He'd gotten the chance to kick serious ass, he had a date tomorrow with the girl he liked, proof that his fiercest rival *wasn't* a complete bleeding heart like he'd thought, and absolute total freedom.

All things considered, that was a damn good day.

"Well, guys," Sonic told his hosts as the ring portal to his home Loop opened up, "it's been fun. We should do this again sometime when the universe isn't on the line."

"See you around, Sonic," Rock smiled and held out his fist.

"Until next time, Rock," the hedgehog bumped the robot's fist with his own as his friends and allies began filing through the portal.

"While you're busy, I'm going to pop down and talk to my new loopers," Hephaestus declared. "Don't give me that look. The Loop's stabilizing as we speak and the danger of early termination or crash while I'm down there is negligible at this point. Plus I've got plenty of time before the scheduled Loop end to give them a talk and get back up here."

Sonic and his friends had bid farewell once the doctors and Tails managed to get the Ring portal open to their universe. Cossack, Lalinde, and the other robots had taken their leave shortly afterwards as well and Dr. Light had decided to retire early.

As a result, the three Light siblings were spending a rare moment together outside the lab, recovering from their ordeal when a stranger appeared in front of them. The man was fairly average in appearance with a thick shaggy beard, and his labcoat and face were streaked with soot. His hands bore the signs of dirty machinery work and he favored one leg.

Despite that, he gave off an aura of strength more potent than even Duo's.

"Who are you?" Blues stepped in front of his brother and sister in case the stranger was hostile.

"I am Hephaestus," the man stated. "Volcanic god of the forge, patron of inventors and technology, and the assigned administrator for your Loops."

Sonic stood on a hill overlooking Mobotropolis and thought about his new friends from the other Loop, especially a certain blue robot.

They were so different, and yet so similar.

Two heroes who stood against impossible odds against brilliant madmen who sought to impose their will on whole worlds.

Two beings who simply could not stand idly by while others suffered.

One who was impulsive and one who was calculating.

One of passion, the other of thought.

One of wind and flame, the other of metal and lightning.

One who would always crave a new adventure, one who would always crave an end to adventure.

One who sought attention and one who shied away from it.

One who thrived on conflict and one who simply bore its weight with good grace.

One who could never be at peace and one who would forever seek it.

One of Chaos, one of Order. Each tied to an eternal cycle of war.

Two souls. Two philosophies. Two warriors. Two sides.

One coin.

"Heh," Sonic chuckled to himself as he shook off his musings. "Welcome to the Loops kiddo. Gonna be a wild ride now that you're here."

"So, these 'activation attempts' require 'Anchor candidates' to not die?"

"Yes and no," Hephaestus hedged. "What they require is that they run long enough for the universe to stabilize and the Anchor to be set. Sometimes that is a full baseline run from start to finish, and others it can actually be considerably less. Death of the Anchor candidate prior to being fully set in place as the Anchor is one of the most common reasons attempts fail, but not the only one. And what

counts as 'dying' to Yggdrasil depends on the events of the baseline and the inherent rules of the universe in question."

"Glad to know you have this down to a science," Blues retorted, his arms folded.

Hephaestus raised his eyebrows. "Count your blessings that you are robots. There were no less than three times where that fact prevented one of you from reaching a state Yggdrasil would have interpreted as 'dead'. Or did you think a human could have survived those wounds you suffered from King?"

Blues remained silent, but acknowledged the point.

"I would also like to apologize for the troubles you had getting online," Hephaestus told them. "We were expecting difficulties of course, but what happened went above and beyond our predictions. There were a number of times I thought you might not make it despite the precautions I took."

Rock shrugged at the forge god's statement. "Misfortune, treachery, and Dr. Wily can circumvent any safeguards."

Blues and Roll looked at their brother for a moment before nodding in agreement as Hephaestus chuckled.

"How very true," the admin admitted with good humor. "I do believe you will all do well in the Loops, no matter what you face from here on in. It has been a privilege serving as your administrator, and one I hope to keep up for a good long while. Feel free to enjoy your last few hours before your first true Loop ends and stabilizes, and I will most likely see you around. Probably during my next break."

And with that, the Olympian patron of technology vanished from the universe.

Rock looked to his siblings, wondering what to do for the few hours they were together before time reset. "Movie?" he asked. "We could

see what's playing at the megaplex."

Roll smiled and looked at Blues hopefully.

Blues stared back at his siblings through his ever-present shades. All too soon, they were going to be thrust full force into these 'Loops' and at times have to fight every inch of the way in order to keep their 'section' stable enough so repairs to the other 'sections' of their 'Loop' could be made. Times like this, where they could just be themselves with no fighting or expectations on them, much less together as a family, were bound to be rare.

"Oh, why not?"

And with that, the three robots strolled into the city, one whistling a favorite tune all the way.

"Well, the virus in Wily's as firewalled as it's getting," Hermes stated as he began shutting down his remote terminal. "I couldn't manage to delete it, but it's not going anywhere either. I also linked the damage restoration of Wily's code to the Loop reset. Even if the virus slips the firewall, it can't do anything permanent to the guy."

"Not as good as I'd like, but better than I'd hoped," Hephaestus admitted.

"Oh, and I'm calling in my marker," Hermes said to Hephaestus as he finished packing up his remote terminal.

The god of the forge blinked. "Already?"

"Yep," the god of travel replied and handed Hephaestus a file. "I'd like you to code up a fused Loop scenario according to these parameters and arrange for it to be Rock's first fused Loop."

Hephaestus took the file and looked over it before asking one question: "Why?"

Hermes sighed. "Because while Sonic has many people he loves like family, many more he considers friends, and still others he treats as friendly rivals, there are precious few beings in the multiverse that he truly respects as equals and your boy Rock is near the top of a *very* short list. It's something he really needs more of in his life, especially now with his baseline back up."

"He feels the same way towards Sonic," the smith god admitted. "And he really needs more of that himself too, so–"

Hermes held up his hand. "Look, I know how you feel about this stuff. You don't like doing favors when you feel they benefit you as much as who you're helping. Heck, I don't want to be known as the kind of douche who does things in my own interest and acts like the heavens owe me for it either. So, answer me: Would you have done something like this of your own initiative?"

Hephaestus glared back at his co-worker. "...No."

Hermes grinned. "Then it still counts as me calling in my marker."

Hephaestus continued to scowl as his co-worker took his leave, along with his Nymph companions. A few minutes after Hermes left, Hephaestus began to chuckle to himself.

"Sneaky as always. Well played, Hermes. Well played."

He was so caught up in the humor of the situation that he was a bit surprised when Brynhildr plucked the file out of his hand and put on his desk.

"Yes? Was there something you needed?" he asked.

"So forgetful," Brynhildr purred. "But I suppose we can forgive you after all that excitement."

"You see," Herfjötur sauntered up tantalizingly to his other side, "the Loop you needed to get online is active and stable for the time being

so you don't have to watch it every moment. Hermes' request will keep for now, which I understand means you owe us a custom armor fitting."

"Indeed," Eir cut in. "We like comfortable, flexible, and sturdy armor of course, but only the most skilled smiths can tailor such things so perfectly they fit like a second skin. And of course, that means many detailed measurements must be taken. So we better get started right away."

If there was anything Hephaestus would ever thank his wife for, it was the ability to not blush or stammer like a mortal teen right then and there.

"Well, then," He replied with a tone of light teasing, "we simply must begin immediately. Ladies, let us away to my workspace." (4)

ACTIVATION SUCCESSFUL.

BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' STABILIZING.

SECTION 1 LOOP STATUS: ACTIVE

DUAL ANCHOR CONFIGURATION HOLDING STEADY.

ANCHOR 1: ROCK LIGHT

ANCHOR 2: ROLL LIGHT

ANALYZING DATA FOR LOOPER CANDIDATES:

LOOPER CANDIDATE DESIGNATED 'BASS' APPLICABLE FOR LOOPING STATUS.

ASSESSING...

NO SIGNIFICANT STABILITY ISSUES DETECTED.

ACTIVATING LOOPER...

ERROR: LOOPER ACTIVATION FAILED.

BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' CURRENTLY UNABLE TO SUPPORT CANDIDATE 'BASS' AS LOOPER.

COMPILING LOOP MEMORY DATA FOR LATER ATTEMPT...

BEGINNING NEW LOOP...

ERROR: LOOPER DESIGNATED 'BLUES LIGHT' HAS FAILED TO LOAD CORRECTLY.

Loop 1.1

Rock shook his head. "No response to the signal. Either he's refusing to acknowledge me, or he's not Awake."

Roll frowned. "Didn't that Hephaestus guy say that Blues may have been knocked 'loose' from our Loop? Maybe he is Awake, but just not here."

Rock was thoughtful for a moment. "Could be. I wonder where he ended up if that's the case though..."

Meanwhile, in another part of the multiverse:

"The hell?" Kennex muttered to himself as Rudy revealed the old DRN model he'd been assigned. It... wasn't what he had been expecting.

While the series was clearly stated to be DRN, whatever this was wasn't Dorian. For one, he had a much lighter skin tone. For another, Dorian had never had a pompadour, nor was he particularly in the habit of wearing shades.

He'd been repeating this part of his life several dozen times by now, and it was always Dorian that he ended up partnered with, no matter what was different about how the assignment came about. Dorian was his friend, no mistake, but he'd gotten tired of rekindling it time after time, and had decided to try and see if he couldn't get a different partner. If he didn't throw the MX out of his car, it was still somehow destroyed and Dorian was assigned to him anyway. The time he'd started early enough to avoid having his leg blown off? He just got partnered to Dorian all the sooner. Categorically refuse to return to the department? Sandra got the bright idea to send Dorian to make him come back. Transfer to another city? Dorian got shipped there by a clerical error. Who did they assign to him any time they didn't try an MX first? Dorian. He'd once tried to hide out in an abandoned warehouse off the grid. He'd tripped over Dorian the second day there.

So what was so different about this time?

He tuned out Rudy's explanations regarding the DRN series. He'd heard it more times than he'd ever wanted to by now and could recite it in his sleep. He accepted the rod and touched it to the strange DRN's ear.

The DRN didn't gasp like Dorian. He simply blinked behind his shades and spoke as he sat up.

"Where am I?"

"You're in The City," Rudy told the DRN, "2048. You've been out four years."

The DRN sighed and looked around, his eyes locking directly on Kennex.

"You were expecting someone else," the DRN stated.

Kennex was starting to get a little weirded out, but decided that being honest was probably the best decision. "Yeah, I was."

The DRN nodded. "You the local Anchor for the Time Loops?"

The mention of 'time loops' got his undivided attention. It could only be describing one thing. The other term though... "Anchor? What are you talking about?"

The DRN sighed and facepalmed. "Great. One Loop in, and I have to give someone the 'welcome to the multiverse' speech."

"Okay," Rudy backed away. "I'm just going to go into the next room and one of you let me know when things start making sense again, alright?" With that, he beat a hasty retreat, leaving Kennex alone with the strange android.

"Multiverse?" Kennex tried the word. "As in, other people in other universes are experiencing parts of their lives over and over again? It's not just me?"

"In a nutshell," the DRN agreed. "I'll give you the full version later, but basically all of them have someone serving as an Anchor who holds their reality together. Some start later than others and some have more problems getting started. One of the problems with mine resulted in me being 'untethered' from my Loop of origin, which apparently means I'm going to end up drifting to all sorts of other universes almost as often as I'll be in my home universe. You just got the dubious luck of being the first."

"Well," Kennex offered as he tried to digest all of this, "the guy you're... replacing I guess... is my partner on the police force, Dorian. Which means you're now my partner instead. You got a name?"

The DRN nodded in understanding. "My name's Blues."

---

1) This is his fourth major distinct transformation using a major non-inherent power source in under an hour. You'd get light-headed too.

2) THE VIOLENT IMPATIENT ACTION INDUCED A FAILURE TO CARRY THE ANTI-HERO.

3) Remember, Blues is military hardware.

4) Not telling you what they did while there. It's probably NSFW though.

1.1) Blues is... *Puts on Shades* Almost Human.

Bonus: Mega Loop 1.0 Omakes!

(If Skaia was working normally Omake by Masterweaver)

"...Huh."

Rock looked over the the blue hedgehog. "What?"

"...Okay, so, this facility here? Usually, when Skaia crops up, it's used to create paradox clones of the selected player to send back in time to become the players." Sonic shrugged. "Confusing enough, but yeah. This time, though... you and Roll are among the selected players and... you don't have a genetic code, so..."

The blue bomber glanced at the consoles and blanched. "...please tell me that doesn't mean what I think it means."

"No, it's pretty clear. Genetically, Light and Wily are brothers." Sonic leaned in. "And apparently the children of Eggman and... Eggman's grandfather? Huh."

"This is disturbing on so many levels."

"Yeah, this only counts for this loop, they'll go back to their normal origins next time."

(Deus ex Jenny Omake by masterofgames)

The newcomer leaned against her impossibly huge gun, smiling at a shocked Rock as she pulled a hairdryer out of her dufflebag to blow away the glowing smoke from the muzzle. "Did somebody call for a deus ex machina?"

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Yes, hello Jenny, thanks a bunch."

-) The character of Jenny Everywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition. This paragraph must be included in any publication involving Jenny Everywhere, in order that others may use this property as they wish. All rights reversed.

(Bass vs Mega Man and Sonic aftermath Omake by masterofgames)

Bass managed to slowly drag himself out of the room. With effort, he eventually managed to slowly pass the door frame, and prop himself up against the wall in the hallway. "D-damn those t-two!" he glitched. "I-I-I wasn't out {crackle} y-yet!"

Glaring at the door he had just left through, he cursed both the doctors. "O-one fight, t-to the finish! Is that t-too much to ask for!? No! But again, my {bzzt-crackle} fi-fi-fight is interrupted! He calls me h-his ultimate c-{zap}-creation, so w-why does he n-never show any confidence in m-my skill to get the j-job done?!" he growled. "Well th-that's it! As soon as I get r-repairs, I'm going to {bzzt} sh-show him just how much I need him! I'll rip him a new one so hard that..." he paused. Something was on his shoulder.

Slowly he managed to turn his head. Treble was resting his paw on him, looking sad and worried. He was scorched, covered in dents, walking with a limp, had his muzzle cracked, an ear was missing,

and his left optic lens was clearly offline, but he seemed far more concerned about his partner.

Bass couldn't help it. He smiled. "H-hey boy... got out of-{bzzt}-of there m-more or less intact, huh?" he sparked, managing to lift an arm to rub him behind the ears.

Treble licked his face a few times, then turned around and picked up something off the floor, turning back to give it to his master.

"O-one of those rings rolled all-all {pop} the way out h-here, huh?" Bass smirked, perking an eyebrow. A few moments passed. Then, he chuckled. "Ah, f-forget W-Wily... he's not worth the ef-{bzzt}-effort. Tell you w-what boy... You h-help me-me-me {spark} get outside... and once w-we recharge a bit, we'll pl-play a few games of fetch with that thing... okay? Least I can d-do for what you-{br-zap}-you've been through for m-me today."

Treble just grinned and barked, letting Bass slump over his back.

Bass couldn't help but laugh quietly as Treble helped him along... so there WAS one thing he cared about more than being the best.

So sue him.

(Inside the Wily Egg Climax Omake by masterofgames)

"SUPER SONIC MAN!"

The roboticized hero slowly emerged from the cloud of smoke, then stopped to casually brush himself off, as if taunting his foes that they weren't worth his time.

"It's genius really!" Wily cackled. "Convert the roboticizer from a chamber, to a wave, shielding ourselves in it! Anything organic that

passes through it now works for us, and anything mechanical explodes! Ivo has outdone himself!"

"Oh come now Albert, you had the idea to have it chaos powered, to be able to work on those pesky super forms! It's brilliant!"

"Oh, but I couldn't have even conceived of such a thing without all your painstaking notes on how those jewels actually work! Your study into the science of chaos is downright inspired!"

"But you were the one who found a way around that 'billionth ring' nonsense that shielded him from my last attempt at something like this! Mecha Sonic would have been a total success if not for that, and your Robot Master blueprints had just the workaround we needed! It's marvelous!"

"Wondrous!"

"Remarkable!"

"Incredible!"

"Breathtaking!"

"Uh, guys?" someone interrupted. All turned at once to face the newcomer.

Or all three of them in this case.

"You do know he has, like, fourteen billion rings by now. Base minimum." Amy grinned, leaning against her hammer casually.

"Plus, we all worked out ways we could take each other out in emergencies LONG ago." Tails smirked, arms folded.

"I have no idea what's going on..." Sally gasped, hands on her knees, not having had any prior loops to get back into shape after the politics of baseline.

Both doctors paused, then as one pulled out calculators. "... factor of fourteen..." "... resonating fields..." "... power multiplied, not just doubled..." "... does the first one count, or was it one use only?" "I don't know! Err on the side of caution!"

A few moments later they both grinned and started laughing again. "Ha HA! STILL not enough!"

"Barely..."

"Hush! They don't need to know that!"

"Sorry."

"(Ahem) With our upgrades, even THAT couldn't keep him his free will!"

"And all that really means, is that HE also knows just how to take YOU out!"

"And even if you DID manage to either beat or revert him, you can't fight us up close thanks to the field, and we can negate any chaos powered abilities you throw at us!"

"Ah, SHADUP!" Amy shouted, using her hammer as a golf club to launch a chunk of debris at them, which the shields deflected, but still snapped the doctors out of it.

"R-right. Albert, gloating later, fighting now!" Paradox Eggman stammered, quickly returning to his controls.

While Mega Man took Super Sonic Man on, Knuckles and Shadow guarded Proto Man, and Roll kept the doctors busy, Sally was understandably a bit startled when Tails and Amy grabbed her, pulling her behind some rubble. "Wha-?"

"Shh! We can't let them overhear us!" Tails hissed. "Even in this racket, Eggman has always been observant."

Amy nodded. "Right. It's going to be our job to come up with a plan. Close combat is out entirely. Anyone who tries is either suddenly working against us, or scrap metal. So we need ranged options."

Sally blinked, taking a moment to process, but this WAS her usual role in baseline, making the plans. "W-well... they said they were chaos shielded..."

Tails shook his head. "No, they said they could negate chaos power. Negate. Not drain. We'll need chaos power just to get through that layer of the shield, to cancel it out."

Amy giggled. "Looks like the Doc's big mouth has betrayed him yet again!"

Sally couldn't help but grin. "Okay, okay, but we still need something strong enough to both get through the conventional shielding, and still take them out once it gets through."

Tails nodded. "We have an option there. Plain old magic."

"Magic?"

Tails clenched a fist. "The blood of Merlin Prower flows through me! I am a firstborn son of the second most powerful line of mages Mobius has ever created! And I will give every drop, of both magic AND blood, to protect those dear to me! I am the chosen one, of the Zone Prime! And I will NOT let my friends down! But... I am NOT the one with the power to take the doctors down. YOU are, Aunt Sally. You're the single most powerful magical force in our universe, maybe any of them. You KNOW what I'm talking about..."

"Th-the Source Of All! T-Tails, how did you discover that!? It's been the single greatest Acorn reign secret since my family first took the throne! A-and besides, I rejected it! I refused to let it rule me!"

"Maybe." Tails shrugged. "But that doesn't mean it rejected you."

"Sally..." Any interrupted. "You're new to all this. Think carefully over everything we've told you about the loops. Some loops, you take the place of someone else. And that means you learn things. Now picture those loops going on, and on, until you lose count, and then lose count of the number of times you lost count, and then lose count of how many times you did that. Over. And over. For what may as well be forever. To know the universe, intimately, from all points in space and time at once! Take a good look at Tails. Right in the eyes. And tell me what you see..."

And so she did.

And then Sally saw him. REALLY saw him. As the way he was, not the way he had been. With a tiny smile and a sigh of resignation, she placed her hand against his cheek. "... When did you grow up when I wasn't looking? My god, it only just hit me how much you must have seen with all this looping business. Your eyes... so old..." she laughed as a she wiped away a tear escaping from her eye. "... and yet, you still call me 'Aunt Sally'..."

Tails just smiled and pulled her into a hug. "You just mean that much to me."

And really, that was all that needed to be said.

A minute later, Sally had finished her first good cry from the loops. "O-okay, I'm... I'm sure this will all hit me a lot harder when this is all over, but... I'll do it."

Tails nodded. "Okay then, we'll need this though." he grinned, taking the Sword Of Acorns from his pocket and handing it to her, taking her hand in his own and curling her fingers around the hilt. "Amy, she's going to need the crown as well."

Amy blushed. "Yeah... the crown..."

"... Amy..."

"Funny story there..."

"AMY!"

Amy paused, then started waving her arms frantically. "W-wait! I have an idea for something even better! Where did I leave it... Aha!" she grinned, pulling her prize free from her pocket.

"... Amy, is that...?"

Amy nodded. "The Ring Of Acorns! I've had it just sitting around, recharging... for a few centuries... almost forgot about it completely." she laughed nervously. "It should work as a circlet, and it HAS to have at least one wish by now."

Tails just facepalmed and groaned. "It'll have to do."

Sally couldn't help it, and broke into giggles. "S-so old... and you still act like kids! No wonder it took me so long to catch on!" she laughed.

"Ooh, just take it! We still have a job to do." Amy pouted, plopping the ring down around Sally's head.

Where it promptly burst into dust and light particles, reforming into a golden circlet, a bright blue jewel inlaid in the center.

"... Well, the wish worked. And... oh wow, Aunt Sally, that's a Super Emerald! That should handle the chaos shield no problem! Now, you aren't used to magic, so I'll guide you, and you just... Aunt Sally?"

But Sally wasn't there. In her place was the start of something more. Her eyes were gone, replaced with twin pools of golden light, infinitely deep, a sparkling golden miasma was slowly emerging from her body, and her hair was starting to blow in a wind that was not there.

Sally herself was seeing what she saw the first time she had immersed herself in the Pool Of All. The crowning of her ancestor, the war to unite the feuding tribes into a single kingdom, the

meddling of the echidnas, the formation of the planet, the Ancient Walkers themselves!

And then it all stopped. Her vision slowed to a crawl as it reached the point she had rejected it last time. She could FEEL the All, looking at her, inspecting her, asking her 'are you ready to submit?'. And with a (purely metaphorical) deep breath, she answered.

'NO. No I will NOT submit! I will NOT let you rule me! I am Princess Sally Alicia Acorn, and I demand that YOU submit to ME!'

'Well...' the All responded. *'... it's ABOUT TIME!'*

And the visions resumed. More than resumed, they came faster. She could see her solar system forming, the galaxy, the universe! She could see the first beat of eternity as Time itself began! She could see the raw, primordial power of creation! She could see it weaving and threading together, forming everything that was, and would be. And she could see the very source of it! At the base of each ribbon of creation, linking them all, was the branch of an enormous tre-...

Sally's Self paused, and turned to look at the being with their hand on her shoulder. It was a being she could not quite comprehend, but she could tell it meant her no harm. She got the feeling it was smiling at her.

'THIS FAR. AND NO FARTHER. YOU ARE NOT READY. WHEN ALL IS WELL, I WOULD BE HONORED TO HAVE YOU JOIN US. BUT NOW, YOU ARE NEEDED ELSEWHERE.' the... being, said. And then, it carefully turned her around, and with a gentle push, returned her to her body.

Hermes leaned back in his chair with a grin, arms folded behind his head.

"Saw you zoning out there for a second. Something up?" Hephaestus asked as he considered a choice between three lines of

code.

Hermes shook his head. "It's nothing. I had a free moment while the code was compiling, so I was just checking on an old project I started eons ago."

Hephaestus just shrugged and got back to coding.

"Ah..." Hermes sighed to himself, leaning forward and wiping a tear. "They grow up so fast..."

Sally's body erupted in a pillar of spiraling gold light, the Sword Of Acorns in her grasp transforming, the hilt etching itself with oak leaves, the pommel shifting to the shape of an acorn shell, and the blade growing thinner and longer. No longer was it her family sword. Now, it was Her sword.

The entire battle halted as Super Sally flicked the three-and-a-half tons of rubble the three of them had been hiding behind aside with a casual backhand.

"You Forget Your Place!" her echoing voice thundered as she pointed at the doctors, her other hand shifting Her sword into an underhand grip. **"You Meddle Where You Were Never Meant To Tread, And Show Neither Caution, Nor Compassion. Thus The All Does Make This Decree... SUCK IT!"** she roared, flinging the blazing sword like a javelin.

(Metal Wily Omake by masterofgames)

"And FURTHERMORE! I, the glorious Doctor Metal Wily, have created THIS!" he boomed, holding up an odd spherical machine in one hand, and a chalkboard in the other.

"..."

"..."

"..."

"... BE IMPRESSED, DAMN IT!"

"It would be easier if you told us what it WAS!" Roll frowned, arms folded in defiance.

"O-oh... right... (ahem). THIS, my woefully ignorant friends, is the result of decades of research! My life's work! Have you ever noticed, pray tell, that no matter what the math says about your odds in pulling something off, they never seem to match with the actual success rate? Well THIS-!" he declared, holding the chalkboard up higher. **"is raw, mathematical proof that a higher power, that none here can even begin to comprehend, is able to predetermine the outcome of any event, based on what would be the most dramatic! I call this being 'Fate'."**

Sonic shrugged. "So?"

Metal Wily resumed the mechanical laughter, holding up the machine. **"Because of THIS you fool! With this machine, I can cut off 'Fate' from the flow of events, and enforce the power of raw, untainted math as the most powerful force in this zone!"**

Tails started to pale. "Wait, you mean..."

"That's right! No last minute rescue, no pulling it off despite the odds, no power of suspense, and no drama! Here, a one in a million chance, is genuinely one in a million!" he cackled.

(Crack Omake by LordCirce)

As Hephaestus' workshop was made home to a relieved god and three excited Valkyries, a lone terminal flickered on in his abandoned

Mega Loops 2

"Hey, bro, haven't seen you in a while," Rock greeted his older brother at the meeting spot they'd arranged. If everything went as typical, Dr. Wily would be launching his first invasion about this time next week.

"It's only the third Loop since we beat Metal Wily," Blues observed.

"For you, maybe," Rock informed him. "Roll and I have had a couple dozen by now. Usually it's both of us, but sometimes, like this Loop in fact, it's just one of us Awake. But enough of that, what have you been up to?"

"Well, my first Loop had me as a police robot," Blues told his brother. "I even had to give the 'welcome to the multiverse' speech. Heck, the guy's admin hadn't even bothered to come tell him about the Crash when it happened."

"Ouch," Rock winced. "What about the other one? You said this was your third."

"Superheroes," Blues told his younger brother with a smirk. "Didn't look like any native loopers, and I never identified who was serving as Anchor, but I met an interesting lady. I was a superhero robot called 'Prototype' and she was a half-asian, half-cherokee superhero known as 'The Shifter'. We fought alongside the heroes 'Mr. Fixer', 'Setback', and 'Chrono Ranger' against a storm of supervillains. It was pretty cool."

Roll wasn't entirely sure where the urge to say 'meep, meep' to Dr. Wily's face came from.

She was even less sure of how some business known as ACME Industries became a literal overnight success immediately afterwards.

2.3

Roll hadn't been expecting this when she told her brother she wanted a Loop off from doing the hero thing. Though, in retrospect, perhaps she should have.

"Don't you worry!" the robot wearing her face said cheerfully from outside the high tech cell Dr. Wily was holding her captive in. "I'll take real good care of your brother! Teehee!"

Rock formed his arm into the Mega Buster and pointed it at the head of the robot impersonating his sister. "Who are you, and what have you done with Roll?" he demanded.

Fake-Roll stared for a second before she started *giggling* . "Cheater," she accused dementedly. "You're all cheaters. Heeheehee!"

"Answer the question," Rock ordered.

Fake-Roll's form wavered as she brought her arm up to point at Rock. "Cheaters should know their plac–"

BLAM

Rock had recognized the robot as her disguise fell. Waltz. The murderously insane future-clone of his sister, and who had been lining up her own shot at him before he pulled the trigger first.

"WHAT IS IT WITH YOU ALL AND SHOOTING ME IN THE FACE?!" came the enraged screech from where Waltz was getting back on her feet.

'Damn,' Rock thought to himself as he opened fire again, trying to put Waltz down as quickly as possible. *'Roll was right. She is looping.'*

2.4

If Megatron ever wanted to try and prove that the Loops had a warped sense of humor, this iteration would be Exhibit... J or K. There had been a *lot* of strange Loops after all.

As it was, he was the head of the Inspecticon Detective Agency in a Loop setting a human might have called the illegitimate offspring of film noir and steampunk. Where he and all other machine lifeforms were of comparable size to humans.

"Well, Mr. Light," he told the figure on the other side of his desk, "it seems you are indeed quite qualified for the position."

Oh, and had he mentioned that he was in the middle of a job interview?

"Thank you," the very human-like robot replied.

"I am concerned with this list of additional skills however," he continued. "They are, shall we say, rather improbably long for someone of your age."

"Let's just say I spend a fair amount of time Awake," the potential hire told him.

Megatron blinked at the inflection. So, the prospective hire was a looper, eh?

"Megatron, sir!" Starscream burst into the office, frantic but respectful.

There was another big, but not unpleasant, difference. The local, and Unawake, version of Starscream still coveted Megatron's position. But the agency's rules and position on the side of the law meant that he did this by making himself the most indispensible member of the agency. Loyal, competent, able, and most of all no backstabbing. Just the occasional hint that Megatron should think about retirement. Even the local Soundwave, elite information hound that he was, had proven less useful in their investigations.

And for Starscream to be this frantic, it could only mean one thing. The one mobster who Megatron's Loop memories told him he'd dedicated his life to putting behind bars, and sworn not to retire until successful. The local mob boss version of his oldest enemy.

"We just got a new case! High profile murder, and it looks like the work of Optimus Crime's gang!"

"Get Shrapnel, Bombshell, and Kickback from forensics together Starscream," he ordered calmly. "Have them ready to leave in five minutes."

Starscream saluted and left the office, allowing him to turn back to the prospective hire. "It looks like you're in luck Mr. Light. I'm prepared to hire you provisionally for the duration of this new case. If your work on it is acceptable then I will hire you to a permanent position. Is this acceptable?"

"Quite," the new hire agreed.

"Then," Megatron stood up and held out his hand, "allow me to welcome you to the Inspecticons Mr. Light."

"Please," the shades-and-scarf-wearing individual replied as he shook Megatron's hand, "call me Blues."

2.5

'...hguoht pu s'gnihtemos taht gnileef taht ekahs t'nac llitS' .flesmih ot thguoht kcoR *',lausu sa emaS'*

.yawa detropelet yeht ,taht htiw dnA

"...pleh ruo deen t'nod uoy won ees nac I ...devirra uoy elihw yliW .rD pots ot gniyrt neeb evah eW" .edis sih yb flow tobor eht detacidni lavir erutuf-dna-ecno sih ",elberT s'eh dna ssaB m'I"

.pooL eht htiw pu saw tahw tuo derugif eh litnu dluoc eh sa stneve dna egdelwonk enilesab ot esolc sa kcits ot denimreted ,deksa eh "? uoy era ohW"

.layarteb won-yb-elbativeni-yllaer-tub-neddus sih litnu pu naretev eht tset ot gnikool oreh eikoor eht deyalp ssaB llew woh tsuj gnitseretni tahwemos saw tI .rednirG daM eht fo mrof degamad eht detaefed d'eh ecno 'hctam gnirraps' rieht retfa redluohs sih dehctulc eh sa deralced ssaB fo mrof railimaf eht ",naM ageM ,yas yeht sa doog sa era uoY"

.stniop yek wef a rof evas elbaellam ytterp demees taht tsap stneve ,revewoH .elpmaxe rof nooM aR fo taefed eht ot pu stneve eht sa hcus ,dilos ytterp erew enilemit eht fo strap emoS .tog reve yeht sa esolc sa ro ,enilesab ot gnidrocca enog dah stneve lla ,revewoH

.tnereffid yrev saw gnihtemos niatrec saw eh tub ,ti no regnif sih tup t'ndluoc eH .pooL siht tuoba ffo yllaer saw gnihtemos taht thguoht kcoR

2.6

"But I'm really *not* Mega Man!" the robot pleaded.

"You can't fool *me* Mega Man!" Dr. Wily jeered at his captured foe. "Such a pathetic disguise and name change can't fool me! I mean, anagramming it to *Game* Man?! Really?"

"But that really *is* my name!" the robot wailed.

"Hey Dr. Wily," a familiar voice called out from behind the scientist. "Who are you kidnapping this time?"

"Why, I'm kidnapping *you* , Mega Ma–" Dr. Wily stopped, blinked, and turned around.

"Hooray!" the captive robot cheered. "Mega Man is here to save me!"

"Wha–?" Dr. Wily sputtered in shock. "Bu–? Him–? You–?"

Rock grinned as he prepared to rescue the robot that had been mistaken for him. Dr. Wily's expression was so priceless, he almost wished he'd actually planned this himself.

2.7

Rock sweatdropped as he looked upon the... *thing* being shown to him.

'I am never letting Auto design my armor ever again,' he told himself.

Roll grinned to herself. Her brother was taking the Loop off from heroing like she'd done, and as a result Dr. Wily had begun fielding female versions of many of his robot masters.

And since this was the beginning of his 'seventh' invasion, she'd get the chance to see a female version of Bass.

She was so caught up in anticipation that she almost didn't dodge the shot aimed at her head.

"Aw..." a disturbingly familiar voice rang out. "Why'd you have to go and do that?"

"Who are you?" Roll called out, hoping that it wasn't who she thought it was.

"I'm Waltz!" her female opponent chirped pleasantly as she came into view. "And you're Mega Woman! I was told to test you and help out so I could betray you later, but I thought it'd just be more fun to kill you!"

'Damn it...' Roll swore silently as she engaged her insane counterpart.

2.9

Roll glared at her opponent and initiated her super adaptor with Tango.

"You're going down, nya!" she hissed as she brandished her current form's claws.

'Damnit dad,' she chided mentally at the familiar feline personality drift, *'you said you fixed that...'*

"Think we can pull it off?" Roll asked her brother.

"Most likely," Rock replied. "We're both Awake, Blues is here instead of bouncing around the multiverse, and we've spent a lot of time gauging reactions to the kind of concepts we're going to be introducing to others. It should work long enough for what we want to do."

Wood Man stared at what his enemy had given him. It was an engraved invitation to a candlelight vigil to be held in a few years.

"Have you gone mad?" he asked the questionably sane robot.

"Possibly," Rock, aka, Mega Man answered. "But I'm also serious. I have... information regarding how our continued existence; yours, mine, Dr. Wily's, and everyone else's; is owed to the sacrifice of another. I think we should be able to put aside our differences long enough to honor that."

"Let's say I believe you..." Wood Man examined possible escape routes from the *clearly* insane robot. "Where's the proof? And why so far in the future?"

"Well..." Mega Man started, before displaying a hologram with a list of names. Mostly robots. Many of whom were built by his creator Dr. Wily. *And didn't exist yet.* "I have a guest list. And if you don't agree to stand down until the specified date, Wily may never build your later brothers."

Wood Man stared at the evidence before him. Wily had talked about a few of the designs mentioned on the list, but there was no way this blue robot could know, so how...?

"I-If you can convince the others..." Wood Man got his vocal processor working again, "I'll be there."

"Of course, Roll," Tempo smiled as she accepted the invitations for herself and her mother. She didn't know why, but she could tell this was very important to the other robot.

"I suppose I'd better get to work," Dr. Light said as he looked over a few names on the guest list he'd yet to finish building. Why his children were so adamant about this was a mystery, but he still couldn't bring himself to deny them.

"Get bent, robot," Xander Payne tore up the invitation and spat on it. "I'm not buying what you're selling."

"No," Ra Moon stated before attacking.

"Why the heck should we–" Needle Man started before being silenced by Shadow Man.

"It is only right to honor the fallen," the alien robot stated solemnly. "No matter if we knew them or not."

Rock let out a relieved breath. After Ra Moon's stubborn, and fatal (to itself) refusal, he was glad that Shadow Man was proving more amicable.

"Can you bring Ra Thor too?"

"We'll do our best," the ninja promised.

"Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Why the hell not?!" Doc Robot laughed in agreement as they dueled.

"NEVER!" Waltz yelled with the only moving part of her still operational, her intact limbs hanging limply from her frame. "I DON'T GIVE RESPECT TO NOTHI–MPHRNG!"

Quint looked grateful as Roll covered her insane clone's mouth with duct tape. "For that alone, I'll agree to this."

"Thanks," Rock smiled. "Though if you could bring the others on this list from the future with you, we'd appreciate it."

Quint raised an eyebrow behind his blue shades as he read over the short list of very specific robot master models.

"Please, Poppa?" Kalinka asked her father as she read her copy of the invitation Blues had given not only them, but her father's robot

masters as well.

Reverend Dark hadn't extracted his brain to be put into Dark Man this time around. No, he'd only been another of the robot's hologram disguises all along.

"The Church of Robotic Superiority shall honor your request despite your misguided nature."

The restored contenders for the World Robot Tournament and their respective creators looked at each other in puzzlement, hoping that one of them could make sense of this strange invitation.

"I don't see any reason why not..." Centaur Man allowed.

"You are serious?" Sunstar gazed upon the earth robot who had come to him with the bizarre proposal. The earth robot who had disabled all of the Stardroids without killing them.

"Always," Mega Man told the living instrument of destruction.

"Very well," the absolute leader of the Stardroids agreed. "But our conflict shall resume in this place one week afterwards until a proper resolution is reached.

"If that's what it takes."

"And you agreed to this, *why?!* " Dr. Wily railed at the robot he'd built as his own son. The supreme fighting machine known as Bass.

"I lost a bet," Bass folded his arms defiantly.

"Well, *I'm* not agreeing to this!" Wily huffed.

"Roll told me you probably wouldn't," Bass smirked, causing his father to scowl at the reminder that he'd lost not to Mega Man, but his unweaponized *sister* . That girl was *mean* with a broom. "So, I'm going to make you a bet."

"Like what?" Wily asked irritably, interested despite himself. A set of pictures landed in front of him that caused his eyes to widen. How did anyone know about that unused plan?

"You build these guys and let me fight them instead of Mega Man," Bass grinned eagerly. "If I can beat them without destroying them, then you *and* them all agree to the deal. If I *can't* , then I tell the Lights no deal and it's back to business as usual."

"You're going to thr–" Wily started in disbelief.

"I. Don't. Throw. Fights," Bass growled fiercely. "No, this is my chance to prove that I'm the best robot you could ever build. I'm bringing my best game, and I expect you to bring yours."

"Prepare to eat those words!" Wily declared energetically. He'd show his uppity son. CRORQ and the nine robot masters he was to command would be victorious!

"I am uncertain of this," Duo told his friend. "I am glad to help you honor the fallen, but I doubt Slur will be so accommodating."

"Which is why I'm only restoring his voice," Rock replied. "I'm hopeful, not stupid."

"That remains to be seen," Slur shot as the avatar of Evil's vocals came online. "I heard your proposal to my immortal foe, and I wish no part of it. While I relish the continued opportunity to spread Evil, I care nothing for any whose loss has allowed me that chance. Such simpering weakness is not in my nature."

"Had to try," Rock shrugged as he disabled the naturally villainous robot's vocals again. "At least Sword Man and the others were receptive. Even if it Frost Man still doesn't get what's going on."

"I win, pops," Bass grinned.

"So you did," Dr. Wily slumped despondently.

"Dr. Light," the alien robots Apollo and Luna declared regally, "in return for the aid you and your family have rendered, the Constellation Droids would be honored to attend the event your son is hosting."

King stared at the one who'd made this... odd and intriguing offer. "Agreed. Hostilities will cease until one month after the event. The fallen should always be shown proper respect."

"Thank you," Blues bowed formally.

"You know what I'm thinking?" Mayor Leonardo Dorado grinned widely.

"Does it start with 'wow'?" Rock sweatdropped.

"Breaking news everyone!" Plum charged into the offices of the B&C Gazette.

The Emerald Spears, including their leader Xander Payne, had turned on the news to watch the proceedings. Officially it was just to keep tabs on what the robot and his supporters were up to.

At least that's what they'd told themselves.

What had been planned as a simple gathering of humans and robots both friendly and not to the Light family had somehow grown out of control. The gathered individuals in this area alone were impossible to count and the news cameras of every station on the planet were broadcasting the event worldwide.

It was with a supreme sense of nervousness that Rock stepped up to the microphone and began his speech.

"We are gathered here to honor an unknown existence," Rock spoke solemnly to the crowd before him. "We know not who they were. We do not even know what they were. For that is what our continued existence cost them, their identity."

"The ancient Norse believed that creation was a mighty tree that spanned all the dimensions, from below to above, from past to future, and from here to the hereafter. If that is true, if all of creation is a tree beyond any mortal comprehension, then our universe is no more than a mere branch upon its bough. A branch that at some point was in danger of being lost forever, erased from existence itself."

"But there are other branches upon this tree, and among them were those who saw our peril and stepped forth at great risk to make certain that ours did not fall from this great tree into the endless abyss of nothingness beyond. And one of them paid a price so ultimate that it is beyond comprehension."

"However their loss was not in vain, for it is thanks to them that we do still exist. From their tragedy, we have gained another chance to forge a better future for ourselves. A chance to fight for the shining promise of tomorrow, even if we can never agree on what that means. That is what has been given to us, and that is why we honor those whose sacrifice we can never remember."

"If you feel that your life has any worth at all, then please light a candle for our vigil and observe a moment of silence so that our

gratitude can be known to all the heavens and beyond."

Everyone in the crowd and all across the world began to light their candles in memory of something whose loss they did not understand, but still somehow knew was of great importance. In one spot, the immobile figure of Waltz, propped up next to her brother and keeper Quint, shed a single tear of genuine sadness even as her mad viral mind railed silently and impotently behind her disabled vocals. The silence stretched for several minutes among the pinpricks of burning flame before Rock realized that the whole world was waiting for him to break the silence.

"If..." he choked on the palpable emotion in the air. "If there remains anything out there of those who were lost, any kind of existence at all, then I hope they can understand our sorrow for what was lost and our gratitude for what we still have."

"I... I hope they can hear me when I say: Thank you."

Scattered across the wide multiverse run by Yggdrasil, various beings of all shapes, sizes, and temperaments paused for no apparent reason.

Some were of significant importance to the chain of events that fueled the Loops in their universes, others were of little consequence at all in the grand scheme of things. Some lived so long before the events of the Loops that they were dead and dust by the time they happened, their names little more than legend if remembered at all. Others were set to exist so far into the future that their many times great-grandparents were yet to be born.

Some were in active Loops, some in yet-to-activate areas, others in stable branches, still others in unstable Read-Only portions, and a few in the dangerous quarantined areas of Yggdrasil.

But all stopped what they were doing at the same metaphysical moment within creation and, for reasons they would never truly

grasp, said "You're welcome."

2.1) Sentinels of the Multiverse. And if anyone guessed that 'The Shifter' was the looper with no home Loop Jenny Everywhere, give yourself a cookie.

"The character of Jenny Everywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition. This paragraph must be included in any publication involving Jenny Everywhere, in order that others may use this property as they wish. All rights reversed."

2.2) I wonder if Dr. Wily has any coyote heritage...

2.3) Waltz is gonna a recurring problem I think...

2.4) "Larceny is the right of all sentient beings!" (Tagline by EdBecerra)

2.5) 'Online' does not equal 'fixed'.

2.6) Mistaken identity.

2.7) Sound advice.

2.8) Yep, definitely a recurring problem.

2.9) I still make no apologies for catgirl Roll.

2.10) Ideas are very difficult things to kill. They may fade with time or slip out of your mind as quickly as they slipped in, but they always seem to pop up again. Perhaps a bit different due to the passage of time or distance in space, and typically with no clue that they existed previously in any form, but still alive and well.

The Lost Loop, to us, is the Story Never Written. It does not exist and never will, for the writer who would have written it set it aside and moved on to other projects never to return. But the characters and ideas that made it up still exist. The characters from the Story

Never Written were recycled and adapted for other stories, and the ideas reused in a new setting. The Story Never Written still exists in pieces, and those pieces can be found in other stories you are familiar with. You may never know which pieces those are, but they are there nonetheless.

Mega Loops 3

3.1

Rock smiled sadly to himself as he Awoke. The candlelight vigil last Loop had gone better than he could possibly have expected. Somehow; in between arranging to have his friends, allies, and even most of his worst enemies attend; the entire world had gotten involved. And it had been a glorious, if somber, event where many tears were shed over the loss of those that no one could remember.

The whole thing had been almost all anyone could talk about for the following week until the Loop ended. Hostilities between him and his foes hadn't even gotten the chance to resume.

"Rock?" the voice of his father cut into his musings.

"Yes dad?" he answered. He normally tried to keep the paternal references down until the Loop progressed to the point where he would supposedly be more casual about that relationship, but his emotions were still a little raw from the memorial and he wanted that little bit of personal reassurance that certain precious things remained the same even when the lives of those close to him were reset.

"I know you wanted some time to collect your thoughts after that memorial service you conducted," Dr. Light entered the room sporting a somewhat baffled expression, "but I do believe someone has rewound time. I need your help to investigate this phenomena. Dr. Wily probably isn't responsible since he seems to have no memory of anything odd, but I'm not prepared to discount any possibility at this point."

Crash

Both males of the Light family turned to where Roll had dropped a breakfast tray and was staring at her father with tears of happy disbelief in her eyes.

"You..." Dr. Light's daughter and Rock's twin sister trembled with emotion. "You remember?"

"Why yes, I do..." Dr. Light stroked his chin thoughtfully. "And I seem to have this strange recollection of recurring deja vu about some things. This isn't the first time this has happened, is it?"

Both of the Light siblings shook their heads slowly before proceeding to fill their father in on the Loops.

3.2

"All I want to know, David, is why?" Dr. Light asked the man who had cost him his children. The man who had presented a time machine as the only method of defeating the challengers from the future. A time machine set to take all within a certain area forty years into the future with no way back. There was a very good chance he wouldn't live long enough to see his children again this Loop, and even though he would likely see them again the next Loop he Awoke in, it still hurt.

"Because you, Wily, and all the rest of your scientist group were my opponents, doctor," David Xanatos of Xanatos Enterprises replied. "Threats, if you will, to my success. All part of the game. Nothing more, nothing less."

It was true. He'd bought out the businesses run by Cossack and Lalinde handily early in his career and removed them as players in the game. Light and Wily were more difficult. Light had enough business savvy to retain control of his company, Light Labs, and enough inventing genius to keep it on the leading edge of

technology. Wily was a madman who desired world domination and was ultimately impossible to reason with.

So he'd inserted himself into the little war between the two, playing both sides against each other while building his power base. He'd caught on to the 'Mr. X' gambit and worked to undermine Wily's assets under the identity and gain control of them. By the time of the World Robot Tournament, he had enough of a controlling interest to arrange an 'accident' for the man in disguise.

With Wily out of the picture, his remaining contingencies were easily dealt with, leaving only Light as the last remaining competitor. The man refused to play in the cutthroat realm of business, instead believing he could save the world from itself. And so Xanatos had set out to show him that such naive beliefs had their price.

He'd bought out the Chronos Institute a while back in preparation for the return of Quint and the wild card Waltz, secure in the knowledge that such beings would never stay away for too long. And in any case, it gave him control over temporal manipulation technology which was a boon any way you sliced it. He'd then presented the plan to Light's heroic 'children' as a way to send the two back to the future in a pre-planned location that he and various allies would have forty years to prepare for, knowing their exact time and place of arrival. He told them up front that there would be no way of returning to this time, knowing full well that they would accept that condition if it meant saving human lives. Heroes were so easy to predict after all.

And now with his children gone, Light's fire and drive had dimmed, and with them his genius. It was only a matter of time before he could buy out Light Labs and cement his position as the supreme technology provider on the planet.

"I sometimes wonder, David, if you even know what game you're playing," Dr. Light returned much more calmly than Xanatos would have predicted.

"I always know what game I'm playing," he clarified, a little annoyed with how familiar Light always was, "and I always play to win."

"And what happens when you play a game that cannot be won?" Dr. Light inquired. "Perhaps a game where one loses merely by playing?"

"Such a game does not exist," David Xanatos stated with utmost confidence and turned to leave. He'd indulged the man long enough and he had business to attend to. "Good day to you, doctor."

"Of course there does," Dr. Light spoke to his back. "It's called War."

Xanatos ignored the man as he took the elevator to his penthouse office. The game had been an invigorating challenge, but he'd come out on top in the end. Really, with his capacity for planning and manipulation, there was no other outcome to be had. And to top it all off, he now had no less than forty years in which to cement his power base before the robotic heroes returned. And when they did, he'd be waiting just as promised with enough resources to cement a position as world hero in addition to everything else he'd accomplished in his life. Though he wasn't quite sure if it would serve his plans best for those heroes to be 'tragically slain' in the crossfire or allowed to 'quietly retire'.

His ultimate goal, known only to himself, was to develop technology to make him immortal, but being known forevermore as the man who saved the world would be a nice consolation prize if that didn't pan out.

He idly accepted a letter from his trusted secretary, secure in the knowledge that she would have made certain it contained nothing dangerous before letting him have it. He paid her very well for the extra duties that kind of security entailed in fact and he'd vetted her loyalty every way he knew how. He smiled to himself as he sat down in his comfortable office chair and opened the letter.

The explosion that destroyed his office was later determined to come from a cleaning drone that had supposedly been checked over five times for such things. Xanatos himself survived, but he was rendered blind and deaf as well as severely burned with numerous broken bones.

When the children of Light and their opponents finally reappeared, the promised reinforcements were not there and they had to save the world on their own as they always did. The Loop would last long enough for them to spend one final day with their elderly father.

As for the Unawake David Xanatos, he was confined to a hospital bed while his company collapsed under the squabbling of his subordinates and their power grabs. For the rest of his life, he lived with a message of two words and a one letter signature burned into his mind. The last thing he'd ever seen.

You lose.

- W.

3.3

Where was he?

/:SYSTEMS DIAGNOSTICS RUNNING...

He felt groggy... this definitely wasn't Light Labs. The sound was wrong... and he felt different.

/:ALL SYSTEMS FUNCTIONING

He blinked, and shook his head to clear his vision. He was being unstrapped from a container, and there's a human in front of him. Neither of them matched Dr Wily or Dr Light's profiles though, even in the many loops he had gone through.

"4th Generation Anti-Shadow Weapon Blues, are you functional?"

Great. Yet again he's a robotic weapon. Or at least designed to be one... Before he can respond though, the memories hit him. He's a robot that has been destroying other Robots to prove his strength. More robotic than others, but still with a human resemblance... so that's why he had his Buster still. No shield though, but that could be figured out later. What was more concerning is that the creators seemed to think of the Anti-Shadow Weapons as... simply weapons, not even caring if they developed personalities.

"He isn't responding." Another voice? Ah, another scientist has entered the room.

"Give him some time, sometimes the systems take longer to come online with Blues's special programming." The other said. "Blues, are you functional?"

No point in delaying anymore he supposed. "Yes. All systems are functional." He kept his voice devoid of emotion. No point in revealing just what was in their precious weapon.

"Good. We have a special task for you today."

He hated the tone that entered that man's voice when he said special.

He stepped into the red arena, images flashing through his head of battles fought here. He as glad to see on the way here that while his body looked like a human teenager, he was dressed in red and grey and still had his usual shades, although the lack of a helmet was unusual. Still, he looked across the arena and saw that a girl with blue hair had entered.

"So, they're running the fifth generation already?"

A memory. Apparently in the past he and the other robot had talked, although at the time she had the barest inklings of a personality. And yet before him Blues could see dread, he could see worry... he could see a true soul in her. Was she a looper? From what he had observed from his memories, Shadow Weapons don't develop personalities quickly, and the time stamp of his awakening, while a rather long time, wouldn't have allowed the barely living machine to look so... Human.

The thought ran from his mind though as he saw another robot enter... and another flood of memories. Of a more human unit, numbered 24. And yet she looked the exact opposite, grey, emotionless eyes and an all too robotic step. "Labrys, you are to fight Blues and 24 here." Another of the scientists. "You are to destroy them."

That got him listening. "Why am I fighting them?" Labrys asked.

"#24 is simply the next in line. After you fight her, you are to take on your predecessor and prove your power."

Ah, so that was why. He matched Labrys's name to his update database and indeed he saw that her name was 5th Generation Anti-Shadow Weapon Labrys. It was almost as bad as that one failed loop with Dr... no. Dr Light might not be the best of creators but he didn't deserve to be associated with THAT. And by the look on Labrys' face, she didn't want to fight #24, let alone him. But #24 wasn't going to give her a chance, raising a gigantic sword... and then collapsing to the ground as one of her legs is shot out. Blue blinked... and then looked down at his own smoking buster. That had been pure instinct there.

"Blues, what are you doing? You were not ordered to attack #24!" The scientists again. Time to give them a shock then.

"You never ordered me not to." He slowly allowed himself to smirk. "Besides, I'm not exactly fond how you're treating my sisters here." That's right, Labrys was a lot like a sister to him. Even as he

processed that, he felt something invade his programming... they were trying to take control, he could already see his buster arm being forcibly raised.

"Your personal opinions on this don't matter Blues." The scientist responded. Out of the corner of Blues eye he could see the one legged #24 pulling herself up with the sword... she's not fit for battle, so why are they forcing her to battle? "Labrys, destroy them."

They want them both utterly destroyed. Not damaged, not rendered unable to battle, destroyed. A waste of robotic life for their own tests. Was he going to let them do this to him, to Labrys? Force him to become a pile of scrap and her into a weapon without a soul?

NO

/: ORGIA MODE ONLINE.

/: OVERRIDING CONTROL. USING PROGRAM "LIGHT".

3.4 (Hubris Plus)

Had he been flesh, Rock would have been panting. Instead, he grit his teeth and drew himself up for another round.

"You don't have to do this," he said as he reluctantly raised his Mega-Buster.

This fight was always difficult. Not because of the fight itself so much as because of who he was facing.

"No," his opponent answered. "But I want to."

Facing off against someone he *knew* should be a friend.

"Wily's just using you!" He implored.

The visor gleaming despite the cavern's darkness.

"You have *no idea* what it is to be used," came the scathing reply. Motors whirred as drills sprang to life.

This time was harder than the others. This was the first time the armor had shown emerald instead of crimson. The first time his opponent was trailed by long brown hair instead of a yellow scarf.

"Dr. Lalinde–" he tried to begin, but knew it was a mistake almost the second the words were out of his mouth.

" *Dr. Lalinde* ," Fault Woman roared, "took away everything that made me *me* and used my body like a *puppet* !" Her drill smashed into the wall where his head had been an instant before, the upgraded alloys driving through the stone as though it were tissue paper. The room shuddered, dust drifting down from the ceiling.

"You'll bring the whole place down!" He shouted, internally reprimanding himself a moment later for preying on what he knew to be a phobia of Tempo's.

" *Good!* " She snarled, "I'd rather be dead and buried than alive like *that* ." She tore her arm free of the wall and turned to stalk towards him. "I remember it, you know," she went on, tone almost becoming conversational. "What it's like to move and think and talk, but not *feel* . Anger, hate, fear... They aren't good, but they're *so much better* than nothing."

"I owe Dr. Wily everything for saving me from that. He plugged me back in, made me *me* ." She lifted an arm to the side as she strode towards him, drill biting into wall almost casually.

"You'll not switch me off again."

3.5 (Masterweaver)

"...Is..." Roll stared. "Is Wily *singing* ?"

Rock shrugged helplessly. "All the robot masters did. Why not him too?"

"He's actually pretty good," Blues observed.

3.6

Roll sighed as she watched Bass walk off happily. She'd agreed to another date that would never happen after his help against Dr. Wily's latest hair-brained scheme.

She'd been keeping track of how long their Loops lasted, and once again, the date was set for after she was certain the Loop would end. She'd have agreed to an earlier outing except... Except she was waiting for him to start looping first. Otherwise, what was really the point? It wasn't like she had the biological urges humans did or anything...

3.7

Joshua Blevins, more commonly known as Chance Fortune to his friends both in-Loop and out (heck, he tended to refer to himself as the latter in his own head more often than not), was once again at the Burlington Academy for the Superhuman. Regardless, he'd stepped through the teleporter as he always did, had the encounter with the creepy alien-possessed guy he'd have to deal with later in the school year, and was now waiting for his friend and future teammate to come through.

He was idly betting on whether or not the Mars-native super-brain Percy, known to most as Space Cadet, would be Awake when the teleporter activated and someone wholly unfamiliar stepped through.

"You're not Percy," Chance found himself saying before he could stop his mouth.

"No," the boy with the sunglasses, yellow scarf, and pompadour replied evenly. "You holding Anchor here for him?"

"Something like that," Chance replied sheepishly, recognizing the standard looper check for what it was. "Anyway, we should get going. My other friend's going to be arriving soon and he likes to put on a show, even when not Awake. I'm Chance by the way. Chance Fortune."

"Blues Light," the stranger replied.

"Wait," Blues, or Proto Man now that orientation and costume generation had finished, cut into the explanation of the Loop setting and his hosts, "you mean to tell me that you got into a school for training teams of superheroes and you *have no powers* ?"

"Yep!" Shocker, Chance's second friend who'd arrived being escorted by a police drone from super-juvie, slapped Chance on the back proudly. "Never gets any from other Loops either and he's still the best leader the Outlaws could hope for!"

"Yeah," Chance rubbed his masked head in embarrassment. "I got in originally because my mentor sent in a new application claiming I have unnaturally good luck, and since luck's a pretty fickle power no one can prove I don't have it. Anyway, most Anchors seem to have traits that follow them no matter where they Loop, and mine is apparently my total lack of genuine superpowers."

"Impressive," Blues raised an eyebrow behind his shaded visor. "Though I imagine that comes with plenty of downsides."

"Yeah," Chance admitted. "I can't even generate my own subspace pocket. Space Cadet, the guy you're replacing, had to make me a

device that generates it for me. I'm not entirely certain how it works either, just that it does."

"How long have you been looping?" Blues decided to ask. Aside from the member he was replacing, the entire future team of super students was Awake. Psy-Chick, Chance's psychic-powered girlfriend; Shocker, the juvenile delinquent who could shoot electricity from his eyes on his second chance with the law; Gothika, the magically powered witch; Iron Maiden, the battle-hungry amazonesque daughter of Odin and the god-like heroine Steel Valkyrie (who also happened to be the Outlaws' future trainer most Loops, and one of the school's board members, which was also the most prominent superhero team in the world); and the morally rigid yet physically stretchable Private Justice. Next to that, being a human-like super robot prototype was practically normal.

"Not long compared to most," Chance admitted. "It was just me at first, then Space Cadet and Shocker started looping, and then the Crash happened and the rest of the team got shaken out. I know hearing about it was pretty scary. How'd you handle it?"

"I had to watch it happen," Blues replied bluntly. "I'm from the Loop they were trying to get online. Some reality virus contaminated and merged a bunch of local villains and then tried to sacrifice the visiting Anchor and both our universes to attain admin-level power. And I was captured, restrained, and utterly helpless to stop it. It was only divine intervention that eliminated it and preserved my own universe."

The table was completely silent as they all digested that.

"It is a sobering reminder of all that this school tries to prepare us to fight," Psy-Chick replied as she grasped Chance's hand comfortingly. "Most of the threats we face may have less permanent repercussions while the Loops are in place, but the general concept is the same."

Gothika nodded. "Vile forces with no care for the lives of others will forever seek their own selfish ends to the detriment of all around them. We must forever do all in our power to see that they fail."

"Damn straight!" Iron Maiden pounded the reinforced steel table emphatically, denting it.

"Justice must always be served!" Private Justice declared, trying his best to strike a heroic pose. "It shall be our honor and our privilege to have you as a member of our team!"

"Thanks," Blues smiled gratefully. "So what's this place like?"

"As you might have guessed," Chance smiled wryly, "we're a superhero school. Lots of team training and mock missions interspersed with actual threats to the school and/or the world at large. Fall freshman semester we normally face off against The Invincibles, the obligatory team of super-jerks, in the winter competition and usually beat them, often barely due to Superion's broken power set. Then we end up in the Shadow Zone, the extra-dimensional super-villain prison, over winter break. After that, it's anyone's guess what we have to face. Loop usually runs until graduation day unless I die."

Blues chuckled for a bit. "Would any of you believe this is my first time in school?"

The other six at the table blinked, before they began laughing good-naturedly.

"Man," Shocker put his arm around the red and gray armored robot's shoulders companionably, "after this place everywhere else will just seem plain boring!"

3.8

Dr. Light tried frantically to stop his latest creation from devouring all of his equipment. Honestly, he'd just been trying to invent a robot to help take the burden of fighting off of his children during those Loops he was Awake along with them. Using compactor technology seemed like the most logical choice for a robot master meant to counter other robots. But for some reason the programming had a major glitch when it came to recognizing what constituted a valid target.

All in all, it seemed like Garbage Man just wasn't going to work out.

3.9

Dr. Wily cackled to himself as he worked in his makeshift lab down in the ruins. He didn't know where his familiarity with Ra Moon's technology came from, and at the moment he didn't care. All that mattered was that he'd managed to cobble together a way of boosting the alien machine's power exponentially, far beyond what he could have managed if he'd had to learn the way Ra Moon's technology worked from scratch.

With but the push of a button, he would prove himself the greatest power in all the world beyond any shadow of any doubt!

The mad doctor laughed, completely unheeding of the malevolent glow Ra Moon was producing as he activated the device.

And everything in the world, living or otherwise, shut down.

Including him.

3.10

Rock blinked as he Awoke. The last thing he remembered, he'd been at the city rededication where Mayor Leonardo Dorado was to rename it in his and his sister's honor.

And now he seemed to be in a metal structure, a space station if he wasn't misreading the sensations. He was then distracted as his internal diagnostic came back.

"Why am I a gumball machine?" he asked in confusion.

"Because it was what I had handy when I made you," and unfamiliar human, Joel according to his Loop memories, responded.

"Could be worse," the voice of his sister deadpanned and Rock turned to see a vaguely feminine patchwork something-or-other talking to him. His Loop memories told him this was Roll, even though she looked nothing like herself. "You could be a horrid mish-mash."

"Now, now you two," Joel tried to placate the two small robots when the monitor in the room sprang to life.

"Speaking of horrid mish-mashes..." Rock found himself saying as the face of a frizzy-haired scientist that wasn't Dr. Wily filled the view. A quick check of his Loop memories told him this was Dr. Forrester, the one responsible for stranding Joel in space so he had to make himself and his sister for company not to go crazy. Rock's Loop instincts didn't like the guy, and he really couldn't bring himself to disagree with them.

"Hey Dr. Forrester!" Joel greeted cheerfully, happy to talk with anyone, even his tormentor.

"I hope you called to tell us when you're gonna let us down," Roll sniped at the man.

"Oh, I'll be happy to bring you down," the madman grinned. "Just as soon as your minds are bent to my will so you can help me do the

same to the rest of the world. Anyway, I hope you're ready for today's movie. It's a real piece of garbage called..."

Rock tuned the man out as he lined up the rant with his Loop memories. The guy apparently thought he could break the will of humanity by forcing them to watch terrible movies, and the only thing standing in his way was the fact that Joel, along with the two of them, managed to enjoy themselves with snarky wit and general tomfoolery.

As far as he was concerned, it was a step up from how he normally had to save the world. This might actually be kind of fun.

3.1) Guess who's Awake. *And* Dreaming.

3.2) It's worth restating that this isn't looping Xanatos.

3.3) Blues doesn't stand for this kind of thing. Nope.

3.4) Someone other than Blues was fixed by Dr. Wily this time.

3.5) I imagine Dr. Wily has a pretty darn good (or maybe evil?) singing voice actually.

3.6) ...This is rather depressing if you think about it.

3.7) I did this as part of my library challenge (writing a Loop snippet based on a book you read from your local library). The book in question is Chance Fortune and the Outlaws by Shane Berryhill.

3.8) Where's Captain N when you need him?

3.9) *wince*

3.10) The Megaverse's first Safe Mode Loop.

Mega Loops 4

4.1 (I am writing to tell you all that I am abandoning the Mega Man Loops and shall henceforth be writing about the drama that the Yggdrasil admins get up to instead.)

"You have to hide me!" Coyote heard before a thoroughly distressed and weeping female form tackled him back into his office, somehow managing to land them both in a compromising position. "My husband's after me with those *horrid* valkyrie hussies of his! It's *so* terrible! Booohoohooooo!"

'Aphrodite,' the trickster god mused, content to let a beautiful female form, no matter how distasteful the actual personality was underneath the pretenses, cuddle up to him while he mused over the situation. Hermes has put out a 'prank at will' hit on the love goddess recently and while the notion of 'trickster solidarity' was laughable at best, the loose-knit inter-pantheon group knew when another was being serious. And Hermes was *very* serious about this.

Apparently the goddess had tried a spiteful prank on her husband in the middle of a critical operation where such a distraction could have resulted in an entire branch of Yggdrasil collapsing. Coyote loved a good prank as much as the next trickster god, but even he knew there were lines you just *didn't* cross. Certainly not without expecting a world of pain in retaliation. A lesson he himself had learned from painful experience.

Plus, her husband Hephaestus was one of the *smart* gods. The idea of tricksters having rules might have been patently ridiculous, but staying on the good side of someone highly intelligent was always a sound idea. As was staying on the good side of the guy who made the best toys.

"Well, my dear," the old trickster chuckled to himself in a way that would have sent a more sensible being to running as far and fast as they could, "it's quite simple! Your husband and his cohorts are looking for the most beautiful goddess in the heavens, correct?"

"Yes!" Aphrodite beamed at him, utterly clueless as to what he might be planning. "You *must* save me from the barbaric ravagings they'll inflict on me! I'm too beautiful to suffer such indignities!"

"No worries, madam!" Coyote's grin grew wider. It was almost *too* easy. "If they are looking for the most beautiful goddess, then all we need do is make you the *ugliest* goddess! They'll never suspect a thing!"

Coyote cast a plethora of memory-to-photograph spells in rapid succession. The look on Aphrodite's face was going to be this season's best seller by a wide margin.

4.2 (Yeah, right! Now let's get on with some Megaverse April Foolishness!)

Roll grumbled to himself as he faced off against the president of the Percussions. This had been an aggravating Loop for several reasons. For one, he was a male model this Loop instead of a female one, originally built as a harpsichordist. An Unawake Rock, built for proctology, was similarly his sister instead of brother.

For another, all of the robot masters and their weapons and weaknesses had been flipped around without rhyme or reason. For example, Sheep Man had ended up weak to Spring Coil which had been gained from Hard Man during Dr. Wily's π(Pi)th invasion.

The latest crop had consisted of Picket Man, Turbo Man, Hyper Storm H, Centaur Man, Shark Man, and Ra Thor with their weapons being ugly unrelated to the houses looted by their names and appearances.

And then there was their president. The aquamarine and purple armor and the red shaded visor with the green helmet crest jumped an ensemble that slapped Quint. Except the president of the Percussions was female.

'Please don't secretly be Waltz...' Roll prayed as his opponent brought out the bulldozer/slinky hybrid known as Sakugarne to begin the battle.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" the voice of Hephaestus interrupted the admin using his terminal.

"Waiting for you to get back?" Coyote tried hopefully. Maybe if he played innocent, the God of the Forge wouldn't notice the contents of the dis–

"And fiddling with the Loop scenario parameters," the divine smithy crossed his arms challengingly.

'Worth a shot,' Coyote winced at being caught. He'd honestly thought he had more time. "Eh, heh... April Fool's?"

Hephaestus's scowl deepened. "You have thirty seconds to explain why I should not make an example of you."

"You wife came to me pleading for me to hide her from you," Coyote began.

"I care not for her imagined worries or current location," the volcano god snorted in contempt. "I am in too good a mood to let her, or you, ruin it with inane antics."

"Yeah, I figured you weren't actually after her for real. You volcano gods aren't exactly subtle when you're mad," Coyote allowed nervously before remembering that his grace period was dwindling fast. "But I told her I could help, since if you were looking for the

'most beautiful' goddess, then I would hide her as the *ugliest* goddess!"

Hephaestus continued to stand there impassively, but his lack of aggression despite Coyote's time expiring was promising.

"I have pictures," Coyote grinned, producing a respectable album. One quite professionally bound and designed. "On the house for you and your lovely companions if you can find it in yourself to forget this little incident."

Hephaestus looked interested in the trickster's offer, but he had a duty first. "If you have done no lasting harm, then deal."

"Cross my heart, hope to fry, stick a teatray in my eye," Coyote promised as he handed the album over. "I'll drop some more with your companions on my way out."

4.3 (Masterweaver)

"So what you're saying is, in order to have your weapon, I need to defeat you."

Ice Man rolled his optics. "Yes, you pathetic bundle of circuits! Honestly, why did Lightbright upgrade *you* ?"

"I'm just trying to clarify here." Rock crossed his arms. "If I do not have your weapon, you have not been defeated."

"That would be a logical conclusion."

"So if I defeated you, I would have your weapon."

"You're very circular in your reasoning, but yes."

"Thus, if I have your weapon, I have defeated you."

Ice Man sighed. "Yes. That's exactly it Rock. That's it."

The blue bomber nodded, shifted his Mega Buster, and froze a portion of the wall solid.

Ice Man gaped in surprise, staring at the wall for so long he almost missed Mega Man walking away. "That... Hey! Wait, where are you going?!"

"I have your weapon, therefore you are defeated," Rock replied, fighting to keep a straight face. "Quod erat demonstrandum, as the Romans say."

"What-No! You're supposed to take my weapon, not just copy it!"

"You really want me to rip you apart to get at your icing mechanism?"

"Yes! Wait, no." Ice Man shook his head. "I'm not defeated! Walk away and I've won!"

"And yet you have demonstrably lost by your own logic." Rock shook his head sadly. "Don't throw a tantrum about it."

4.4 (Terrace)

Rock had found dealing with the various Robot Masters significantly easier over the course of successive Loops. His ability to recall the weapons he'd copied off of them in the baseline, without needing to fight them first, meant that even those who'd been an utter bitch to fight in the baseline, like the upcoming Airman, only required minor amounts of effort now.

What was *really* annoying were the variant Loops where the Robot Masters changed in some way. Dr. Light noted that many of those incidents might be the result of Wily Dreaming of info and technical schematics that he wouldn't ordinarily come up with for *years* .

Shaking things up from routine might be mentally healthy to some, but Rock *liked* predictable opponents. They tended to be less lethal.

His first hint that something had changed came when he started hearing music on his approach to Airman. It was only when the Japanese lyrics started that Rock brought a hand to his face.

"Wily, you *asshole* ." He was all but *screaming* to Rock that this batch of Robot Masters was upgraded...

4.5

"So Auto's been making his own robot masters this Loop?" Rock asked his father.

"Indeed he has," Dr. Light replied. "There have been some bugs of course, but the designs are rather interesting."

"Who's he made so far?"

"Let's see," Dr. Light pondered. "Surprise Man, a robot that can change appearance in an instant; Shake Man, a blender themed robot; Giga Auto, a 57-meter tall replica of Auto himself; Massage Man, a robot created to give massages; TV Man, who has a television as his head with a face shown in the screen; Watermelon Man, a watermelon-themed robot; the submarine-themed Submarine Man; and his latest creation who he's only told me is called Sexy Man. He's been showing them to Bass."

All of a sudden Bass stormed in, lipstick marks all over his face (Roll could be heard laughing hysterically in the other room), and stomped up to the father and son duo.

"You. Will. *Never.* Let. Auto. Build. Another. Robot. Master. ***EVER.*** "

REATTEMPTING ACTIVATION OF LOOPER CANDIDATE 'BASS'...

ERROR: ACTIVATION FAILED.

BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' CURRENTLY UNABLE TO SUPPORT CANDIDATE 'BASS' AS LOOPER.

COMPILING LOOP MEMORY DATA FOR LATER ATTEMPT...

LOOP TITLE:

4.6

AWAKENING:

Hotaru blinked as she Awoke in a strange place. It... looked like one of her father's labs, but fairly different from what she was used to. Shaking her head, she realized she was in some kind of alcove with wires feeding from the wall into various points of her... oh.

Apparently she was a robot.

JOINING THE TEAM:

Hotaru: So we're all robots?

Usagi: Seems like it so far. It's weird. Luna's a robo-cat and has actually been tolerable. It's my 'dad' that's been on my case about my study habits.

Hotaru: Who's your dad?

Usagi: Some Dr. Light fellow. Like that video game from the Hub. Which would be a cool change of pace really. I could have super-awesome lasers to shoot youma with! Pew! Pew!

Hotaru: *giggles* Well, any problem with me joining the senshi early again? Assuming that's what we are this time?

Usagi: Not at all! Watching Beryl soil herself when she sees the 'senshi of death and rebirth' *never* gets old!

CUT TO: SCHOOL.

Usagi: Why do I still have to go to school?! I'm a robot!

Hotaru: I'm more worried about why I can't clearly remember anything between you saying I could join the team and ending up here.

Usagi: But Hotaru! It's schooooooolll... Boring, boring, I've-had-these-dang-lessons-for-foorreevveerr school!

Hotaru: And now you're reminding me why I didn't hang out with you more in the baseline.

Usagi: *chagrined* Sorry.

CUT TO: AFTER SCHOOL.

Usagi: *confused* I see what you mean about not clearly remembering things between certain points. I just skipped school while still going.

Hotaru: I know, right?

Rei: *sighs* Another messed-up Loop with the meatball head. How did we even meet this time?

Ami: No clue. I'm more concerned with the fact that we're all robots.

Makoto: I'm not! I wanna see just how strong I am! I bet I can punt a youma through three walls, no senshi powers needed!

Minako: I hope I've got some cool lasers! Pew! Pew!

Usagi: That's what I said!

CUT TO: DOWNTOWN

Usagi: *eyes bugged out while looking at a display on her arm* Holy cow! Is that my allowance?!

Minako: *looking over Usagi's shoulder* Holy boiled ravioli! What does your dad *make* ?!

Ami: *confused* Weren't we just leaving school...?

Hotaru: Yeah, that seems to be a *thing* this Loop.

Usagi & Minako: Shopping Spree!

Rei: Someone stop them!

{Sudden explosion heralds the arrival of a new character}

Rei: Not exactly what I meant, but I'll take it.

Jadeite: BWA-HAHAHAHAHA! Tremble in fear, ye mortals! For I am Jadeite of clan Wily!

Makoto: That explains that 'W' crest on his uniform...

Jadeite (ignoring interruptions): General supreme of the Dark Technocracy! Surrender your spiritual energy to power our mighty machines of war now or be crushed under the mechanical might of my youma masters!

{Civilians run screaming}

Makoto: Wait, I just realized. None of us have our transformation pens yet, do we?

Usagi: Doesn't really matter. We can just get them out of our subspace pockets.

Hotaru: Wait a second on that. I think I found something in my data banks.

Jadeite: Go and show these humans why it is foolish to resist! Jeweled Woman Morga!

{A robotic youma appears, what looks like jewels sticking out of her body in various places}

Hotaru /accesses her databanks

Hotaru's databanks /Experimental Public Defense Transformation Protocols 'Silver Millenium' online.

Hotaru /begins transformation subroutine

Hotaru's databanks /Acknowledged. Transformation to Saturn Woman commencing.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

BIRTH OF A HEROINE:

{Hotaru's form is consumed by a flash of light and when it subsides, reveals that she is clad in armor designed in the style of her baseline senshi mode complete with Silence Glaive style polearm}

Hotaru (jumping defiantly in front of the robotic youma): Halt!

Jadeite: Ah, it appears some sport has arrived.

Hotaru: You have no right to terrorize the people of this fair city, nor any claim upon their spiritual energy! Cease your actions and leave, or be punished accordingly! So say I, Saturn Woman!

Jadeite: Jeweled Woman Morga! Destroy the interloper!

Usagi: Quick! Figure out how Hotaru did that or we're going to miss out!

FIGHT SEQUENCE:

While Usagi and the others are figuring out how to trigger their native transformations, Hotaru as Saturn Woman duels the youma master Jeweled Woman Morga. Jeweled Woman Morga unleashes fell energy from the jewels in her body which Hotaru deflects with her polearm. Eventually seeing an opening, Hotaru rushes her opponent and cleaves her in twain. Outraged, Jadeite vanishes from the scene vowing revenge.

CUT TO: SHRINE LABS.

Rei: Shrine Labs? Really? My 'grandfather' is some sort of scientist who studies shinto mystic energies? I'm supposed to be an experimental robot that uses them? How in the world is that supposed to work?

Ami: You really need to check your Loop memories earlier on.

Rei: How? We keep skipping around everywhere and we didn't have enough time at any of them for me to take a few moments!

Usagi: Geez Rei, take a chill pill. The important thing is that we learn how to do what Hotaru did today or we're going to miss out on all the adventure!

Minako: Yeah! And we should also find out where Mamoru, Haruku, Michiru, and Setsuna are hiding. I bet they're just like us this time, even if they aren't Awake.

Makoto: No idea about the first three, but my Loop memories recall a newspaper article on something called the Chronos Institute where they study the possibility of time travel. How much you want to bet Setsuna's holed up there?

4.7 (Hubris Plus)

Rock was never quite certain how to deal with the rare variant Loops where Wily was handled without him having to do anything. On the one hand, it wasn't often that he got a genuine vacation. On the other, those Loops were almost always among the strangest, not to mention the odds of Wily picking up a new trick or a new threat replacing him.

This one, he thought he was going to like. The point of divergence seemed to have been that Blues had never had a faulty power core, which had led to the military putting in an order for robots with full AIs instead of the stripped down versions they usually ended up with. All that had led to a very different news report on the morning following Wily's first attack.

"For those just joining us, last night the newly unveiled Light Laboratory Robot Masters were hijacked by former business associate Dr Albert Wily and used to seize control of vital facilities across the city." The screen showed footage of the six Robot Masters in action as they terrorized the citizenry. "Possessing top of the line capabilities, advanced AI, and impervious to conventional arms, this attack would have been devastating were it not for the speedy and heroic actions of the Sniper Joes.

"Also created by Light Laboratories, Sniper Joe is the code name for America's elite, highly advanced special robotics force. It's purpose: To defend human dignity and freedom against all who would oppose it." A window popped up next to the reporter, displaying various shot of Sniper Joes in action. "While primarily designed as an anti-terrorism unit, Sniper Joes have frequently been deployed in relief

efforts across the globe thanks to various environment adaptation equipment." The window switched to Joes operating at the sites of landslides, shipwrecks, and even high altitude storms via jet packs.

"Yes, fighting for freedom wherever there's trouble, over land, and sea, and air, you can rest assured that Sniper Joe will be there." The window switched to much more recent footage of a group of Joes leading Wily out of his base in handcuffs.

"Sniper Joe: A real automaton hero." The various Joes noted the cameras observing them, nodded to each other, and pumped their fists in the air.

"YO JOE!"

4.8

Blues looked around himself as he strolled along what appeared to be the bottom of the sea. Surviving underwater wasn't that big a deal for him, but the surroundings were strange. It looked as if there were dwellings down here, houses, stores, and... was that a pineapple with a front door in the distance?

Shaking his head, he walked up to the sign at the edge of the submerged town and began to read.

Welcome to Bikini Bottom

Underneath it, there was what appeared to be a recent addition.

Also known to Loopers as the Tenth circle of Hell. Leave now while you have the chance. If, for some incredulous reason you decide to stay, avoid the Pink One and the Yellow One. If you have further questions or concerns it is not my problem, go bother someone else.

- Squidward, local Anchor.

Blues blinked as he processed that, and then turned away from the town and began walking. Saving the world was one thing, but he had a very strong feeling that such services weren't needed here.

4.9

As Rock blasted his way into the robot master's lair, he reflected that he wasn't sure what to think about this new set of Wily bots. They weren't variations on familiar opponents like some of the 'new' foes he'd faced before in the Loops. Instead they were completely new designs he'd never seen before. Dr. Wily appearing on a hijacked broadcast to issue his challenge in a sombrero hadn't happened before either.

"¡Damas y caballeros, the challenger!" a voice called out as Rock was blinded by a spotlight in his face. "¡El Bombardero Azul! ¡Defender of humanity and slayer of innocent robots! ¡MEGA MAN!"

Rock halted to let his optics adjust to the glare of the spotlight on him and noted from the gathered audience of cheering robots around a wrestling ring that Dr. Wily's creations were apparently also completely crazy.

"¡And the defending champion!" Rock's masked Guts Man-sized opponent continued the introductions. "¡Dr. Wily's supreme unarmed combat model! ¡The finest luchador ever assembled! ¡NACHO MAN!"

Good circuits, he could smell the cheese from here...

Rock had to admit that the newest female robot master was rather elegant. In addition to the obligatory mexican skin tones and facial structure characteristic of this set of robot masters, she had a lovely and colorful dress that flowed along with the salsa-style dance moves she was named af–

The super fighting robot's eyes widened as the fabric of Salsa Woman's dress sliced through a solid steel pole and he barely managed to duck and slide out of the way of the unexpected weapon. He really needed to stop admiring his opponent and start disabling her.

Rock stared at the robot master across from him. He wore a sombrero over his mustached face and a mexican-style poncho designed to look like a taco shell, the layered tassels appearing to be taco fixings from a distance.

"You must be Taco Man," he stated.

"¿Taco Man...?" the robot master replied dangerously. " *¡¿Taco Man?!* "

Rock backed up a little in response to the sudden mad ferocity the previously calm robot master was displaying.

"¡I am Taco Man *SUPREME!* " he yelled, pulling an arm-mounted shotgun from under his poncho. Rock wasn't sure, but the way the poncho hung, it looked like that might be the robot's only arm. "¡And this is my *Boomstick Supreme!* "

Rock's eyes widened as he dodged a blast that took a chunk out of the wall the size of his torso. He really should have been expecting something like this after Salsa Woman. Why did so many of Dr. Wily's silliest creations also have to be the most dangerous?

Rock tore down the corridor while doing his best to avoid the flames from the robot master with a pepper for a head.

"¡HAHAHAHA! ¡Run, run as fast as you can! ¡You can't escape from the red hot Chili Man!"

Rock stared as he jumped back from the cloud of corrosive gas. Did the cylindrical Burrito Man just fire that from his...?

Snorting in disgust, he switched to the Red Hot Chili Flame weapon and took aim. Coming from *there* , the gas *had* to be flammable.

"Very funny Wily..." Rock muttered as he worked his way through the priest-like, gourd-shaped Pozole Man's area.

A robot master themed on a ritual dish made with a base of maize at the center of a maze. He probably should have seen that one coming.

Rock dodged frantically as the rotund Pan Man's Sugar Death Bombs exploded around him. He'd puzzled over the meaning of the X-shaped design on the robot master's torso for a bit before his dad had told him that sugared bread with a cross pattern was a traditional dessert served on Dia de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead.

The robot master was certainly doing its best to add *him* to that list.

"So, you're Guacamole Man?" Rock asked the... giant robotic avocado.

"¡Indeed, I am!" the fruit-based robot master declared proudly. "¡You may have beaten the others, but I shall not fall so easily! ¡GUAC CANNON!"

Rock narrowly avoided the surprise attack and returned fire, only for his shots to splash harmlessly off the robot's thick pliable skin.

"¿How do you like my all-natural defense?" the robot master taunted as he continued to blast green goo at the blue bomber. "I'm

practically impervious to your Mega Buster, ¡but my Guac Cannon will have you rendered helpless in short order!"

"Not if I change things up!" Rock declared as he switched weapons and dove for the suddenly panicking Guacamole Man trailing lengths of razor-sharp 'cloth'. "Salsa Slicer!"

Rock checked his weapon energy levels as he waited for Dr. Wily to bring out his latest Wily Machine. Bean Gas was running low, but at least he was able to shoot it from his arm cannon rather than some other part of his body; Salsa Slicer was as well, but that was mostly due to it being so dang useful against many of the robot mooks; Nacho Libre was nearly full, but the wrestling-style maneuver was situational at best; Blessing of Maize was similarly almost untouched; Guac Cannon and Red Hot Chili Flame were both about half full; and he'd only had to use a few shots each of the Sugar Death Bombs and Boomstick Supreme.

"BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Wily laughed as his mechanical war machine descended from the ceiling. "You may have beaten my Mexican Masters and my fortress guardians Mega Man, but even you can't hope to defeat... *this!* "

Rock fought the urge to facepalm. Dr. Wily's ultimate war machine this time was...

...a giant piñata.

4.10

Rock sighed. "I think it says something that with everything we've tried to reform Dr. Wily, *this* is the only one that's worked."

"I know what you mean," Roll sympathized. "Sure, he's been a pretty decent guy some Loops, and he usually cares about his creations at

least a bit, but he *still* always ends up the villain and tries to take over the world. It's actually kind of depressing if you think about it."

"Which is precisely why we *shouldn't* ," Dr. Light declared. "At least not too hard. Let us instead enjoy the affirmation that Albert *does* possess the capacity to be a hero and have some fun with our chosen roles. Now, what points of the city should we send our forces out to seize this time? Careful planning of our next reign of terror is a must. We don't want anyone actually getting *hurt* after all."

4.11 (Leonite)

Rock awoke and looked down at himself. All he saw was that instead of his blue, his body seemed to be decorated in greens... he seemed rather short too... and was that? Oh... "You've got to be Mega kidding me."

4.12 (OathToOblivion)

"Rock?"

"Yes, Roll?"

"Why are we playing soccer?"

"...I have no idea. But, hey! It's fun at least, right?"

4.1) April Fool's! Okay, tally time. How many of you actually fell for this?

4.2) Fun with Mad Libs. The uncompleted version is included on as a bonus below.

4.3) Get Equipped with Logic Bomb!

4.4) The music playing is "Airman ga Taosenai" (aka "I Cannot Defeat Airman").

4.5) Dr. Auto's robot masters are from one of the manga. They're... Patently ridiculous is a nice way to put it. Also, Auto's not Awake. He's naturally this crazy. Bass isn't Awake either yet, not that he'd *want* to remember this...

4.6) The Megaverse gets some visitors. Done in Shadowjack's style.

4.7) Well, they *are* Government Issue...

4.8) The sign was written for the Misc Loops by AbZHz101

4.9) Mexican night in the Megaverse. Thanks to EdBecerra, BadHabits, and OathToOblivion for the initial ideas.

4.10) It's the most peaceful hostile takeover ever!

4.11) Ah, there he is. Now where did Garbage Man get to?

4.12) "Yes."

BONUS: The uncompleted Mad Lib from 4.2

Roll grumbled to himself as he faced off against the [position of authority] of the [Word ending in a 'shun' sound]s. This had been an aggravating Loop for several reasons. For one, he was a male model this Loop instead of a female one, originally built as a [job]. An Unawake Rock, built for [different job], was similarly his sister instead of brother.

For another, all of the robot masters and their weapons and weaknesses had been flipped around without rhyme or reason. For example, [Robot Master] had ended up weak to [Master Weapon]

which had been gained from [second robot master] during Dr. Wily's [number from 1-10]th invasion.

The latest crop had consisted of [third robot master], [fourth robot master], [fifth robot master], [sixth robot master], [seventh robot master], and [eighth robot master] with their weapons being [word ending in 'ly'] unrelated to the [noun]s [verb]ed by their names and appearances.

And then there was their [same position of authority]. The [color] and [second color] armor and the [third color] shaded visor with the [fourth color] helmet crest [verb]ed an ensemble that [verb]ed Quint. Except the [same position of authority] of the [same word ending in a 'shun' sound]s was female.

'Please don't secretly be Waltz...' Roll prayed as his opponent brought out the [construction tool]/[child's toy] hybrid known as Sakugarne to begin the battle.

Mega Loops 5

5.1

Dr. Light was enjoying a quiet lunch with his friend Dr. Mikhail Cossack when it happened. A shockwave shook the city and in moments the events were all over the news.

Dr. Wily's robot masters attacking the city again seemed... less surprising than it should have for some reason. Honestly, he was feeling more exasperated about the whole business than anything else. Maybe he should see a psychiatrist and talk about why he was feeling this instead of, say, terror, panic, sadness, anger, or any of the other emotions he'd have expected in this situation.

Mikhail on the other hand got a look at the eight robots on the news feed and started twitching in a way that suggested immediate violent action if only the offender would deign to step within reach.

Though Dr. Light supposed that he'd be insulted too if his heritage was mocked like that.

Mega Woman had to shake her head at Wily's latest bout of lunacy in the Loops. The Mexican Masters Rock had told her about had sounded bad enough, but these Russian Masters indicated that this was going to become a recurring theme. Of all the times to have a Loop without her brother Awake... Though the Unawake version seemed fine filling in the support role she'd held in the baseline.

Regardless, first up was... Banya Man? Why the heck was he designed to look like a man clad in nothing but a towel around his waist?

Roll blinked as she finally got around to checking her net search results. Huh. Apparently the banya was a traditional Russian steam bath. That was almost clever of Wily. Almost as clever as the next robot master she was about to face, Matryoshka Woman, themed after the Russian nesting dolls Kalinka was so fond of in many Loops.

Opening the door revealed what looked like a giant Russian nesting doll, rather well painted and easily larger than Roll. Having the top half lift up to reveal a more human-shaped female robot inside wielding a missile launcher on her shoulder was a little less expected, but she was able to intercept the shot with her Mega Buster and blow it apart.

The second missile inside the first caught her rather flat-footed though.

Roll sparked as she got back to her feet, having just managed to weather the direct hit of the trick weapon. That packed a lot more punch than Banya Man's weapon had. His steam-based weapon had dissipated rapidly enough to not deal serious harm directly, making the loss of visibility versus his close combat skills the bigger issue.

Matryoshka Woman had retreated inside her thick outer shell, probably to reload, which gave Roll an idea. The armor of the inner-robot was significantly thinner than the outer shell, and if she reflexively closed the shell when damaged like Roll suspected...

Roll grinned and switched to the Scalding Steam weapon.

Roll dodged as her own buster fire was deflected back at her. Trepak Man might look like he was plucked straight from Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker and his primary weapon might be that Russian dance where you sat and kicked, but he was rather effectively kicking her steel-plated behind. For one, those kicks were perfectly timed to her rate of buster fire, and for another his boots were energy reflective,

with the end result being that he was kicking her shots right back at her.

She needed something that could either fire faster than he could kick, or keep going even after being hit...

Roll slapped herself mentally and readied the Nesting Missile. *'Duh Roll! Obvious choice is obvious!'*

Roll stared as she fell through the gaping hole Tsar Man's Tsar Bomba had blown in the floor. He hadn't come *close* to hitting her with that thing and he'd still done significant damage to her.

The golden robe design with inlaid jewels and a Russian-style crown suggested a riches themed weapon, and so the very high yield explosive had caught her off guard. And it looked like he was readying another one.

"TSAR BOMBA!" the robot yelled as he lobbed the explosive at her.

'Oh, heck *no,'* Roll thought as she called up the Russian Dance and proceeded to mark the weapon 'return to sender'.

Roll was twitching as she approached the door leading to Bear Man. This whole area was like one giant bad joke. To start with, every robot had red as a dominant color. Then there were the TVs that were always facing in her direction. And don't get her started on the Riding Joes and their bears. It wasn't the Joes riding the bears, it was the bears riding the Joes.

The door opened and she saw her opponent. A large bear robot standing on his hind legs and wearing Russian-style formal wear. Red, of course.

"I'm Bear Man!" he bellowed at her, like she hadn't already known that, and leveled an arm cannon in her direction. "And *you're pretty*

much borscht! "

Roll dodged the high-speed mass of liquid on reflex alone because her mind had reached pun saturation and demanded an immediate holiday. She absently looked at the dented wall and noted beets and other vegetables among the splash.

'Did... did he really just try to shoot me with actual borscht?' she thought in a daze as she ducked another blast and caught some of the splash to sample. Her nutritional analysis systems were still in good working order, and Roll made a face as the verdict came back. *'Ugh! It's not even* good *borscht!'*

"Under Soviet Wily, borscht eats you!" Bear Man guffawed and Roll felt something snap in her mind.

"That's *it* ." she declared as she switched to the weapon most appropriate for her current destructive urges. "TSAR BOMBA!"

The look on Bear Man's face right before he was hit *almost* made up for the bad jokes.

Roll was torn as she fought Maslenitsa Man. As a robot master themed for a celebration period where people feasted on fattening foods, he was an offense to her drive to keep her father eating healthy meals. On the other hand, his appearance was that of a stack of pancakes with arms and legs and topped with butter (that also served as his primary weapon) mirrored one of Dr. Light's favorite breakfast foods most Loops and one of the few indulgences she was actually happy to help her father partake in.

And not just *any* pancakes. To anyone else he might appear that way, but she knew that particular shade of golden brown. Wily had even gotten the precise light fluffy texture just right.

These were *her* pancakes. Her own special recipe that she'd made herself.

She honestly didn't know whether to be flattered or outraged.

She'd figured out his weakness almost immediately, but she was having to talk herself into using it. The soft material could lessen most damage, but the porousness made it very absorbent as well, which would weaken it. The Borscht weapon would be ideal.

She just... ruining good food with bad went against all her instincts as a housekeeper!

Roll knew perfectly well what an Ushanka was. Kalinka liked to wear the fuzzy hats with the flaps in the baseline and she'd introduced Roll to them. They were soft, warm, comfy, and pretty good at taking a blunt impact. Plus they looked good on her.

Ushanka Man was... He was a spherical head with arms and legs covered with the biggest Ushanka she'd ever seen in person. And the giant hat was doing a good job of protecting him from her attacks. Partly because he seemed to like spinning around like Top Man.

Hmm... That hat protected everything but his legs and despite the icy conditions in this area, Ushanka Man wasn't facing her on a slippery arena.

She decided to try the Butter Buster and fired in the robot master's path, and grinned as he slipped rather spectacularly to fall flat on his face.

Roll wasn't a fan of Comrade Man even before she stepped into his lair. He was obviously running a soldier theme and his underlings, particularly the Comrade Joes, had been very difficult to deal with.

As she took in the WWII-style Russian army uniform appearance and the very obvious flamethrower, she realized that it wasn't going to get any easier.

It was process of elimination that caused her to use the Fuzzy Barrier when he tried to torch her. She'd apparently lucked into a path that allowed her to take advantage of each robot's weakness, and it was the only weapon she'd not used against a Russian master yet.

Surprisingly, the fur-lined barrier held under the assault. It might have caught fire (she couldn't see through it), but it was thick and insulated enough that she was protected. Grinning in triumph, she decided to rush Comrade Man and run him over with the shield. Maybe if she was lucky it had caught fire and the flames would ignite the soldier-themed robot master's weapon fuel.

Wily's latest ultimate machine had given Roll a run for her money. He'd called it 'The Rasputin' and the thing lived up to the name. Six phases so far and each one vulnerable to a different weapon. And the thing was still going.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Wily cackled as the seventh phase, a gangly wood-based puppet-like contraption, emerged from the ruins of the sixth. "Getting tired are we?"

"You wish," Roll retorted as she switched to the Flamethrower and torched the machine's current wood body. The personal forcefield that had been protecting Wily and his controls the whole time flared to life as the rest of the contraption burned to ash. "Give up yet?"

"Never!" Wily cried as the central portion of The Rasputin; Wily's chair, controls, and forcefield; continued to float unharmed. "You may have beaten the rest of my machine's layers, but my forcefield is completely impenetrable to any weapon!"

"Yeah, right," Roll rolled her eyes and dodged an energy blast from a pretty haphazard looking blaster mounted to the chair's underside. "You can still *breathe* , so I bet gasses can get through. So unless you want to find out just *how* scalding that steam weapon you made is, you'll surrender."

"Er..." Dr. Wily actually paused in his assault to check something. "Ha! Even if it can get through, my shield will absorb the excess heat! You won't do anything but make me slightly damp!"

"Maybe," Roll allowed. "But that machine of yours looks pretty bare-bones. You keep saying you're the greatest genius on the planet, so tell me: How long do you think it'll be before the condensation causes a severe and dangerous short?"

"Um..." Wily paused again and appeared to be giving Roll's observation serious consideration. "Oh, fine! You win this time, but my next brilliant masterpiece won't have such a flaw!"

'Yeah, that's what you always say,' Roll retorted silently.

(Omake prompted by OathToOblivion, who said: "I read Trepak Man as Trebek Man for a second there. Guess I'm still in a Jeopardy mood from yesterday.")

"I'm sorry, but your buster must be in the form of a question."

"What?"

Trebek Man explodes

5.2 (Dalxien)

"Well, this is odd." Blues noted as he looked over the side of the cliff toward the sparkling city below, nearly mirroring the stars above it.

"You're not Frederic." A familiar voice noted.

He glanced down and saw a girl- now he knew why the voice was familiar. It appeared to be a non-Robotic roll in a ruffled dress.

"Of course not." He stated offhandedly. Roll should know that-

And then he noticed the subtle differences. She didn't recognize him, but looked like Roll. She had a looper's reaction to his replacement of this 'Frederic' but again, appeared to be his sister. The scenario was adding up in his head in a way he didn't like. His tactical mindset prepared for a hostile reaction without any outward shift.

"You're not Roll."

"Oh." What an odd way for the girl to answer that. She stood, dusted off her skirt and stood next to him with a smile. "You must have a sister named Roll, right?"

To hell with appearances, he took a loose combat stance. "And if I do?"

She backed away, waving a placating gesture to ward off his hostility. She never stopped smiling. "The person you're replacing has a sister. Sometimes this world is all in his head, and when it is, I wind up looking and sounding like his sister."

That stunned the son of Light enough that he dropped his stance. "In my... head?"

"Yup!" She said, and then cringed. "Unfortunately that means you're dying, and created this world in a fever-dream, and all of it's going to end when you either give up the will to live or die. Sorry."

His mouth opened to speak, and then closed. "Alright."

She tilted her head. "You're taking this oddly well. The last guest we hosted threw themselves off the cliff when I explained that."

He chuckled. "Let's just say I'm used to my sticks having shorter ends than most. This one's just a more interesting expression of that than I'm used to. My name is Blues Light, by the way."

She snickered. "No *wonder* you looped here, with a name like that. I'm Polka, by the way." His raised eyebrow goaded her into

explanation. "Almost everything here is named after something musical. Probably because Frederic dedicated most of his life to music."

He sifted through his memories and did indeed find quite a bit of musical programming that hadn't been there before. "I'm a pianist?" He asked, glancing down at his hands.

"He is, yes. What are you normally?"

The hands clenched. "A soldier."

She chortled. "Not for a lack of trying..." She realized Blues was staring. "Oh, sorry. Sometimes he acts a little more like a military commander than a musician. Makes me wonder what kind of fused loops he has, since he hasn't mentioned anything like that in his baseline..." She shook her head. "Doesn't matter. Let's go back to my house. Mother will set up a bed for you and we can go into town tomorrow. I want to see if anything else has changed this loop."

Blues nodded, and followed the girl with the uncanny resemblance to his sister.

5.3

"And what have you two been up to?" Anakin Skywalker asked the latest visitor to his home Loop and his also-looping apprentice.

"Your padawan was just telling me about her bout with Sakura Syndrome," Blues Light, robotic Jedi knight, replied.

"Ah, yes," Anakin nodded. "That was the main reason I turned to the Dark Side for the longest time."

"And getting the 'Darth Vader in full vengeance mode' treatment is what finally snapped me out of it," Ahsoka added. "It may have been

messy, and painful, but that really drove home how my actions affected others."

"You loopers and your neuroses," Blues shook his head.

"Don't worry, you'll get yours soon enough," Anakin smiled knowingly.

"Yeah," Ahsoka nodded. "Anyway, I say we let the new guy take Grievous on. See how he stacks up."

"I take it he's one of the more dangerous opponents?" the arch in Blues's eyebrow was more heard than seen, but apparent nonetheless.

"More speed than most Jedi, highly skilled, full 360 degree rotation in his joints," Ahsoka listed off, "and four arms. With enough weapons for each."

"Huh..." Blues thought about that for a moment. "Sounds interesting. Anything else I should know?"

"He's a cyborg whose body is basically a weaponized life support system," Anakin added, "but trust me when I say that anything worth saving died a long time ago. I've been down the path of darkness and redemption enough to tell these kinds of things."

5.4

Roll was having a very strange time this Loop. Dr. Wily was acting normally for him, the robot masters were pretty baseline for the most part, and everything was as close to 'script' as it ever got. Except for one minor detail...

The entire planet and everything on it, including her, was invisible.

On the plus side, this meant foes like Bright Man (and no, she hadn't managed to make sense of his existence this Loop) were pretty much powerless.

5.5 (EdBeccerra)

"I... Am... NAMAGEM!"

"Funny, you look just like that Megaman 'bot."

"What? NO! I am Namagem, and I am in no way whatsoever related to, affiliated with, or even *know* anyone named Megaman!"

"Dude, all you did was reverse the color scheme of your uniform. You *really* think that's gonna fool anyone?"

"ARRRRGH!"

5.6 (Valentine Meikin)

"So, why didn't we deploy Python Man?" Bass asked Dr. Wily as he looked at the blueprints.

"Somehow, we got the wrong Python..." Wily grumbled. "It was obsessed with silly walks, bad slapstick humor, and had a problem with the word 'Ni'... I have, fourteen times to date, put the personality chip through debugging, and it still can't seem to have a serious fight with even Roll. And I mean Roll BEFORE she got competent and fought like a wildcat!"

5.7

REATTEMPTING ACTIVATION OF LOOPER CANDIDATE 'BASS'...

ERROR: ACTIVATION FAILED.

BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' CURRENTLY UNABLE TO SUPPORT CANDIDATE 'BASS' AS LOOPER.

COMPILING LOOP MEMORY DATA FOR LATER ATTEMPT...

ERROR: UNKNOWN SOUL ACTIVATED AS LOOPER INSTEAD.

ASSESSING UNKNOWN SOUL...

NO SIGNIFICANT STABILITY ISSUES DETECTED.

LOOPING STATUS APPROVED.

Rock stared as the Sniper Joe he'd been facing down suddenly turned and fired on the other one that had been moving to flank him.

He blinked in surprise, but the scene failed to change.

"Why did you do that?" he asked in confusion. Not that he didn't appreciate it, but Wily's forces going rogue tended to be more exception than rule.

"We fight for freedom wherever there's trouble," the robot replied before leaping away.

"Well, yo Joe," Rock stared after the robot.

5.8 (OathToOblivion)

"Pikachu?"

"Yeah, Ash?"

"Why are we robots?"

"I don't know. And that 'Super Adaptor' thing is just plain weird..."

"Yeah. I mean, you're my best friend and all, but I don't want to become one with you or something..."

5.9

"We'll do it dad," Rock and Roll stated together as their father lamented the betrayal by his friend and colleague Dr. Wily. Volunteering had become practically habit for them both by this point.

"No, I must do this myself," Dr. Light declared as he stood dramatically, causing the two robots to blink. That was new.

"But..." Roll looked at her brother in confusion. She didn't think their dad was Awake.

"...you said that nothing could stand up to the robot masters," Rock finished, equally bewildered.

"Fear not, my children," Dr. Light smiled at them as his labcoat fluttered dramatically in a wind they were sure shouldn't be possible indoors. "I shall succeed! For I..."

Dr. Light clenched his fist and raised it above his head, a flash of unknown energy pulsing from him.

"...have fists of SCIENCE!"

The twin children of the apparently fighting scientist traded looks and shrugged. This could prove interesting if nothing else.

5.10

Blues grimaced as he walked through the grave markers in the Shadow Zone, each one indicating someone who had tried and failed to defeat the Shadow Prince. This portion of Chance's home Loop was incredibly creepy, even more-so now that he'd met several of the people each grave seemed to represent.

It was his fifth time here and the place just seemed more unnerving than ever. He decided to focus on other thoughts. Like how he was replacing Shocker this time and the current arrangement of the power-swap effect that had hit every member but himself (due to being a robot) and Chance (due to having no powers to begin with). Psy-Chick's powers, currently in the possession of Private Justice, were apparently needed for the Shadow Prince's device to create a portal out of the zone. At the cost of whoever had them being 'sacrificed' and their essence spread across the universe as pure energy. It wasn't death, technically, and whoever went through it was aware of events from nearly every corner of the iteration. Shocker, who went through it the most, called it the most trippy thing he'd ever done.

Anyway, it tended not to be the end for whoever was made 'one with the universe'. Even though the solid baseline only covered up to the end of this adventure, the Loop typically ran for several more years with widely varying versions of events. But whether the team had to face the Shadow Prince's father, a conspiracy to toss every outspoken 'anti-hero' into the Shadow Zone, or an uprising of the more violently inclined 'heroes', whoever was spread out across the universe tended to be restored to normal along the way. And some very interesting ways those we–

Blues's thoughts were cut off as he spotted a mass of blue next to one of the grave markers. It was a helmet. A very, very familiar helmet... Cracked and broken beyond repair. Against his better judgement, he read the epitaph:

HE RESTS IN EVERLASTING PEACE.

He staggered back as if struck, staring at the grave marker in horror. *'No... It's not... It's just not possible...'*

"Whoa, easy there Proto Man," Chance Fortune steadied the robot as he lost his footing from shock. He looked at the grave marker that had set his friend and teammate off. "Someone you know I take it? Yeah, this place does that."

Blues wasn't really paying attention as he jerked his gaze away, only to see a flash of yellow at the foot of another marker. Another broken helmet at the base, and a bent broom propped up haphazardly...

Blues shut his eyes and let Chance lead him past this place. He didn't want to see any more. He wasn't sure if he could take it.

5.11

Dr. Noelle Lalinde smiled as her creation led her down the lamp-lit street after a wonderful day. Tempo had talked her into taking a day off and had taken her around town, insisting on paying for everything with the allowance provided for her. It had started off with Tempo serving her breakfast in bed (the toast was a little crispy, but otherwise it had been good), then they'd gone to an art exhibit that Noelle had expressed interest in, followed by lunch at an outdoor cafe and then some light shopping, an early dinner at a nice restaurant, and finally a play that Noelle had always meant to go see, but had just never found the time.

"Did you have fun?" Tempo asked her, smiling in a way that made her heart ache. Why did she ever take her creation's emotions away in the first place?

"I did, indeed!" Noelle smiled back. "But I'm still at a loss to the occasion."

Tempo stopped and turned to look at her creator in confusion. "You don't remember what day it is?"

"A Sunday," Noelle started, "but I don't see what that has to do...?

In reply, Tempo walked up to her creator and embraced her warmly. "Happy Mother's Day mom."

'Oh...' she thought in shock. *'Was that today? Have I really been that wrapped up in my work lately?'*

She looked down at her cre–her daughter and smiled before returning the embrace. "Thank you, my daughter."

Rock and Roll looked down from the top of a nearby building. Normally they wouldn't be spying on friends like this, but as the ones who'd given Tempo the suggestion, they felt obligated to make sure it turned out well.

"We're going to have to make sure this is a regular occurrence," Rock smiled at the scene below.

"Yeah," Roll agreed. "That was beautiful. Speaking of which, what should we do for dad on Father's Day?"

"I'd say get Blues to come home," Rock smiled sadly, "but that's kind of a tall order."

"Yeah," Roll sighed. "Maybe a tie?"

"No," Rock tapped his chin and grinned as he got an idea. "For someone like dad, it'd have to be a..."

Roll choked back a laugh as she realized what her brother was thinking.

"Tie Man!" they both chorused before collapsing in laughter.

5.1) In Soviet Megaverse, world conquers Wily!

5.2) Blues's Eternal Sonata

5.3) I've got the Star Wars Blues (ducks thrown objects)

5.4) For maximum effect, imagine this snippet is white text on a white background.

5.5) Feel free to interpret this as you will.

5.6) The wrong Monty.

5.7) Well, now, who expected this?

5.8) More visitors to the Megaverse.

5.9) He'll be okay, he has SCIENCE!

5.10) Chance Fortune in the Shadow Zone, the first and only sequel in the Chance Fortune series. Pity really as it left some juicy plot threads just hanging at the end. But that graveyard of people who took on the Shadow Prince and failed...

Brrrr...

Each marker has items by it that are indicative of who the person was plus an ironic and chilling epitaph. The book focuses on four graves and epitaphs that just make your blood run cold as you realize who's being referenced at each one. Gandalf. Ender Wiggin. Alice Liddell. Harry Potter. I imagine that walking through it tends to be a very surreal and creepy experience for most loopers as they spot graves and think 'I *know* that guy...'

5.11) I hope everyone wished their mother a happy Mother's Day yesterday!

Mega Loops 6

6.1

"Okay, why have you two been acting like idiots?" Blues asked his brother and sister in their weird piecemeal bodies the three had Awoken in after they'd crashed the previous Loop as the result of an incident involving Ra Moon and a pie fight.

"It's in our contract," Roll nodded sagely as Rock produced a document from a suspiciously convenient drawer and handed it to him, pointing at a few lines of fine print.

"All visitors to the Satellite of Love, regardless of origin, are compelled to take part in the events that occur therein, make inane witty commentary about said events, and generally partake in ludicrous tomfoolery," he read blankly. "What."

"Hey," Rock shrugged. "It makes the most sense out of anything in this Loop."

Blues found he had no argument for that.

6.2

"Hey, Roll?"

"Yeah, Rock?"

"Any idea why we're human this Loop?"

"None whatsoever."

"Had to ask. How about why we're taking martial arts class?"

"According to Loop memories, dad signed us up for them."

6.3

Rock blinked as he Awoke holding a broom.

Correction: *She* Awoke holding a broom.

The sound of metal on metal racing down the hallway heralded the arrival of another and Rock, yep that was apparently still her name, looked up to see what looked like his usual body. Only blonde.

"Rock?" the voice that sounded exactly like his, her, dangit this was going to get confusing, normal one asked in surprise.

"Yes Roll?" she asked, in Roll's normal voice, what was obviously her brother this Loop.

"You Awake?"

"Yes again," Rock sighed and finished reviewing her Loop memories. "Looks like one of those Loops."

"Yeah," Roll calmed down. "Being each other is going to be so *weird* , but at least we're not going through it alone. I guess it won't be so bad, really."

"Check your memories," Rock told her brother. "Wily's female this time."

Roll blinked.

"And I think she has an unrequited crush on dad."

Roll turned to the nearest wall and started banging his head against it.

6.4

Blues carefully examined 'her' memories for the Loop. Apparently instead of being male 'she' was instead known as Carla 'Blues' Franklin, the only daughter of the convicted mad scientist Dr. Franklin who'd been arrested for his illegal actions pursuing a vendetta against a man named Dr. Rudy Wells, his rival in the field of robotic and cybernetic technology. Dr. Wells had received the grant for his CYBORG project and Dr. Franklin had later been terminated from the firm employing both of them for taking his rivalry too far. Several years later, he was captured, tried, and convicted of multiple crimes, including crimes against nature.

The Loop memories told Blues that 'she' was seeking to achieve vengeance against those who had captured her father. They also told Blues that 'she' was human.

The fact that 'she' could perform a systems check only available to a mechanical being revealed otherwise. It seemed that Blues was, in fact a...

'Fembot?' Blues arched an eyebrow at the designation 'her' in-Loop father had chosen for his project. *'Really?'*

At least Dr. Light had gone for something with less implied degradation. Yeah, no *way* was 'she' playing along with this...

6.5

Roll breathed heavily to cool her internal systems as she copied her opponent's weapon. Despite her ridiculous design (seriously, who put projectile energy weapons on a female model's chest?), Toaster Woman had been fairly intense. But the Toast Buster (oh, someone made a punny... Memo to self: Punch said person in the face) was now hers.

With the Freezer Burn from Refrigerator Man (how the heck did an ice weapon manage to look like a flame weapon when fired?), the Hot Air from Dryer Man (surprisingly effective), the Flame Burst from Oven Woman (the semi-obligatory fire weapon), the Ironing Board from Iron Woman (don't laugh, that thing *hurt*), the Microwave Ray from Microwave Man (that did *nasty* things to electronics), and the Throwing Plates from Dish Woman (the shrapnel from when they broke on impact was arguably worse than the initial weapon) she was almost done.

Honestly, she'd just wanted to do the freaking laundry.

"Bwahahahaha!" her next opponent revealed herself. "You may have beaten the others, but I, Washer Woman, will defeat you Mega Woman! Kiss your pristine household goodbye! Soap Flood!"

The deluge of sudsy water roared from the last of the Appliance Masters and engulfed Roll where she stood. The torrent knocked her off her feet and sent her tumbling back out of control. And before she managed to regain her bearings, there was a sharp impact and...

...Roll shot up straight in her bed. What had just happened? Was she Awake in a new Loop, or had that been some weird dream from downloading unverified media from the internet before bed again? After the stuff Wily pulled, the average computer virus wasn't really a threat, but having her antivirus programs run during a rest cycle in response always gave her weird dreams.

A quick check of her memory didn't prove all that helpful. If that had been a dream, she shouldn't still have the weapons. But if it had been a previous Loop, then it had terminated before she'd copied Washer Woman's weapon. And yet there the Soap Flood was in her archived memory banks along with the other seven.

Seriously, what the heck had just happened?

In Hephaestus's office, Morpheus sighed as his fellow Olympian gestured at something on his terminal. "It looks fine to me, Hephaestus. What exactly is the problem?"

"I was hoping you could tell me since you're the expert on dreams," the forge god replied. "Is this a Loop iteration or a mortal dream?"

Morpheus rolled his eyes and looked back at the screen. "Obviously it's..."

He blinked and took a closer look at the display.

"I..." the god of dreams uttered in surprise. "I can't tell..."

"I was afraid of that," Hephaestus moaned. "Yet one more glitchy piece of weirdness I need to sort out."

6.6

Rock considered the invitation he held in his hands. The Battle & Chase circuit didn't show up every Loop, and he usually considered it a relatively pleasant break from the usual stuff he had to deal with. Not quite as fun as the Loops where the robot masters wanted to play soccer (or football depending on what country he was in at the time), but still pretty enjoyable overall.

It was just... Dr. Wily always found a way to disrupt it. He'd steal the prize money, enter a bunch of his robots to take out competitors, booby trap the tracks, secretly be the organizer, or all of the above and then some. And don't get him started on the times that Wily's schemes and someone else's ran into each other.

Of course he'd heard that Wily was actually invited to compete as a result of how viewer interest had spiked after his actions during the last race in this Loop, which could potentially mean he was less or

more dangerous depending on things. And then there was the race track.

Historic Route 66. Start in Chicago, finish in Los Angelos.

Which meant plenty of room for things to go south.

Sighing, Rock got up to go see Auto about getting Rush's racecar mode upgraded. Auto might be nuts, but so was the Battle & Chase circuit.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Plum announced to the cheering crowd gathered in the streets. "Welcome to the first ever cross-country Battle & Chase spectacular, following historic Route 66!"

The gathered crowd cheered ferociously as the racers approached their starting lines and either entered their vehicles or (in a select few cases) transformed into them.

"Just a reminder to our fans and viewers across the country, all proceeds from this race go to the full restoration and preservation of this 2,451 mile historic landmark! So do make sure to pick up some souvenirs at some point! And don't worry about property damage from the racers folks! We've got the best cutting edge containment barriers in place preventing the usual Battle & Chase chaos from spilling off the track, so our racers are free to go nuts!"

Blues took a moment to glance at the other racers from his machine, the Beat Striker. There was Rock in the Rush Roadstar, Roll in the Tango Turbo, Bass in the Treble Darkstar, Dr. Wily (or at least one of his robot doubles, it was hard to tell sometimes) in his modified Wily Machine XX, Quick Man in the Sonic Formula shooting a thumbs up to both Turbo Man and Nitro Man in their vehicle forms, the entire Black Troupe (Black Joe, Black Yellow Devil, and Black 4 Roader), plus a number of other robot masters both from familiar creators (such as Dr. Wily, Dr. Light, and Dr. Cossack) and unknown makers.

"Gentlemen! Start your engines!"

The roar of engine ignition battled with the cheers of the crowd as the racers prepared themselves.

Red light.

Red light.

Red light.

Yellow light.

Green light.

And with a wave of the starting flag, they were all tearing down the highway towards the coast, doing their level best to beat the scrap out of their competitors while they had a free shot. By the time the Chicago city limits were reached, half of the racers had been knocked out of the running.

Roll was a bit tense as she entered Los Angelos. The race had gone as well as could be expected when all the drivers had weaponized vehicles, which meant that something big was probably about to happen.

Almost as if it had been waiting for that cue, the street under her and Tango began to rumble and then lift out of the ground.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!" the voice of Dr. Wily cackled over the publicized broadcast as Route 66 ripped itself out of the ground and into the air. "Behold my ultimate plan! I have co-opted the systems keeping Route 66 contained for this race and turned it into my greatest weapon ever!"

Off in the distance, about where the finish line should have been, Roll saw a massive steel and concrete skull rise into the sky. A steel

and concrete skull connected to the road that was even now trying to throw her and the other racers off of it.

"Behold!" Dr. Wily crowed even as Roll saw his racer transform into an aerial mode and leave the bucking pavement. "My creation! 2,451 miles of mechanical fury! Wily Road 66!"

Roll flipped a switch Auto had installed in the Tango Turbo adaptor and deployed the road gripping device he'd installed. There, now she wasn't in danger of being thrown off.

"But I'm a fair man!" Wily continued. "The race is still on! Whoever gets to the control room at the finish line will gain control of Wily Road 66! Catch me if you can!"

"I got him," the voice of Blues came in over the intercom as Roll saw him fly past in the Beat Striker. Right, Beat's vehicle mode was flight capable. "See if you can keep the rest of the racers off of me."

"Roger that," Rock's voice replied before she could, and Roll sent her own reply as she nodded to her brother in his Rush Roadstar, currently using the same road gripping device Auto developed.

And then she noticed something odd... One of the racers had suddenly changed teams. One of Wily's racers had just re-registered as driving for the U.S. military.

Roll looked over to the side and saw the racer in question, Black Joe of the Black Troupe, flash her a thumbs up before speeding off down the bucking and twisting weaponized road without any trouble.

"How many does this make, Roll?" Rock asked his sister.

"Not many, but enough to be a pattern," Roll responded. Black Joe had managed to win the race and instead of securing the weaponized roadway for Dr. Wily, he'd made it return itself to its original position and shut down before destroying the control panel.

Either there was a Joe unit looping, or variants where a random Joe unit turned on Dr. Wily were becoming a thing. Maybe if they could talk to one of these rogue Joe units for longer than a sentence they could figure out which it was.

6.7

"Lily Aensland!"

As Rock sat in his chair next to Roll observing the first of several individuals to walk across the stage, he reflected on the events of the current Loop. Here, he and his siblings weren't robots. Nor were they exactly human either. Instead they were a revolutionary development in advanced cybernetics. A perfect melding of biology and technology at the genetic level. Somehow both fully biological and fully mechanical at the same time.

"Mithra Asura!"

It wasn't something you could just become either. The process needed time to reach final equilibrium of the body. Like a human, most of it was functionally online by the time thirteen years had passed but full calibration was projected to take up to twenty years. It wasn't a quick or easy process and introducing it into established biological or mechanical systems was a recipe for disaster. The only thing that seemed to work was integration at the time of fetus formation, regardless if that fetus grew in a womb or a test tube. You literally had to be conceived that way. On the other hand, it had led to quite the test run, culminating in something neither he nor his sister had ever done before.

"Graduating Cum Laude, Chelsea Bonne!"

That being graduation from high school, Rock noted as he cheered his sort-of girlfriend as she accepted her diploma. Past attempts at putting him and Roll in school, including a Loop where he and Roll

had been human, had either terminated early or switched to home schooling as Wily's takeover attempts disrupted all attempts to maintain a schedule. But not this time.

"Alan Caskett!"

Waving to his friend, Rock slipped back into his musings. Even with Dr. Wily going rogue and trying to take over the world, he and Dr. Light had still invented what might very well be the next stage of human and robot evolution. It was supposedly inheritable, but obviously that particular test would have been a ways off even if loopers could have children. Regardless, it was an invention that the government required proof was stable enough to allow among the population.

"Ceil Charité!"

And so he and Roll were required to demonstrate that they could be integrated among the population by surviving the biggest social acid test ever conceived. Also known as high school. A trial made much harder by their double life as Mega Man and Mega Woman. Of course, they'd made some good friends on both sides of that equation.

"Graduating Summa Cum Laude, Kalinka Cossack!"

The gathering of Dr. Cossack and his robot masters went absolutely nuts when that was announced, drowning out everything including the cheers of himself and his sister and even thought. It was well deserved, too. Summa Cum Laude was essentially a perfect grade point average. Even the next few names were barely audible as the group carried on.

"Vanessa Dark!"

That name reminded him that it hadn't all been roses. Reverend Dark had been the world's leading cybernetic cultist for a long time, culminating with his transformation into Dark Man, and his attempt to

forcibly recruit his daughter still gave the girl nightmares. Which reminded him that the first attempt at making a cybernetic lifeform, Blues, had run away from home and never really returned.

"Phoebe Deneb!"

Instead, Blues Light hung around with another guy with a love for scarves named Strider and the two formed some sort of 'good samaritan gang' that went around and helped people who needed it. Remembering that led Rock's thoughts to the heritage of the Light siblings.

"Girouette Express!"

As it turned out, the three of them weren't cybernetic clones of Dr. Light. They actually had a mother, whose death from a car crash shortly after the two had married had prompted their father to delve into research with the intention of creating the children the two had been cheated out of by circumstance. Research Dr. Wily had secretly used for his own purposes long before he stole the industrial robot masters.

"Atlas Foster!"

This meant that it wasn't only the Light children who had this wondrous technology. Tech that allowed them to fight against Wily on the same level they were used to, even while it was disrupting school. Bass truly was Wily's son in every way this Loop.

"Graduating Magna Cum Laude, Amy Guile!"

Of course, Dr. Wily hadn't been the only disruption to school life this Loop. There was the long-established criminal organization of Shadaloo that several parents of students had dealt with before and wasn't above holding an entire school for ransom. Rock thanked whatever mental block prevented people from connecting him and his sister with their 'superhero' identities.

"Ran Hibiki!"

Or whatever it was that prompted those who had connected the dots to not make a big deal out of it (after all, it wasn't like they put a lot of effort into keeping their identities secret). He and Roll probably wouldn't be able to go anywhere otherwise.

"Batsu Ichimonji!"

And don't get him started about the whole "Project Justice" incident. That had been a real mess. Of course, he'd had no clue just how many of his classmates were capable of unarmed combat before then, so...

"Sakura Kasugano!"

Speaking of students capable of unarmed combat... As the martial arts fanatic waved back to those cheering for her, Rock allowed himself to be suitably impressed that she'd managed to actually get the grades necessary to graduate in between looking for fights.

"Graduating Cum Laude, Ibuki Kunai!"

The professor at the end of the row he was seated in stood as the line approaching the stage got short enough to accommodate their row. Rock and Roll stood along with the other students and followed him towards the line approaching the stage. The others in their class had joked about how their row was starting with three sets of twins. The female Lei-Lin twins Mei-Ling and Hsien-Ko, followed by the male Li twins Yun and Yang, and then the two of them followed by the remaining twenty-eight students on their row out of the graduating class of 403.

"Graduating Magna Cum Laude, Tempo LaLinde!"

Rock joined the cheers and applause as one of the sole robots in the school; the others being Ripot Battle, Plum Chase, and Chest Strategy; walked across the stage. Even with Dr. Light's

revolutionary cybernetics robotic AIs were advancing by leaps and bounds. A few more students walked across the stage while Rock followed behind Yun Li as he ascended the stairs to the stage and waited for his name to be called.

"Graduating Magna Cum Laude, Rock Light!"

The area where his father was seated exploded with cheers and fireworks (dang it, he'd told Auto not to set those off inside) as the Light numbers celebrated loudly.

"Graduating Magna Cum Laude, Roll Light!"

If anything, the raucous Light party got even louder while a space cleared around them as the families of other graduates sought to put distance between themselves and Auto's pyrotechnics. As he accepted his diploma and shook hands with Principal Commando (formerly a captain in the army), Rock supposed that he and Roll should be really proud of graduating Magna Cum Laude, even after the hits their grades took between trying to save the world and get their homework in on time.

"Glyde Loath!"

Rock got his photo taken and walked back to his seat to wait out the rest of the ceremony. He cheered for his friends; like Mel Masters, Dex Oyama, and that Peter guy who took off at the oddest moments; and politely refrained from not deriding those he was... less than friendly with. Like Theo Payne or his girlfriend Simone Miller. He'd done the same when the chronic bullies, the Boltz brothers, had walked across the stage. He still wasn't completely sure the three had graduated from finally making the grade (none of the students really knew how often the three had been held back) rather than the faculty having had enough of their disruptive, and at times destructive, antics.

He managed no negative expression all the way up through the Weil twins, but had to wince as Frank West walked across the stage. It

would be a long time before anyone at their school could forget the 'zombie invasion' that guy had the misfortune to be at the center of. Thankfully there had been no deaths. Plenty of injuries and medical treatment needed, but no deaths. Thankfully 'zombie-itis' wasn't contagious (this Loop), no matter what the movies said.

And now came the one person he'd been dreading to walk across the stage. His sister's sort-of-maybe are-they-flirting-or-trying-to-beat-each-other-up? boyfriend. That he managed a perfect grade point without disruption while he and Roll had to divide their time between school and saving the world grated on his nerves just a bit.

"Graduating Summa Cum Laude, Bass Wily!"

The entire back of the rented stadium erupted with noise as the entirety of Wily's original robot masters and Dr. Wily himself (all very poorly disguised) proceeded to top all of the previous obscenely loud cheering. Combined.

Rock rubbed the bridge of his nose as the one calling the names of graduates tried to make himself heard over the din. They'd hashed out an agreement with Dr. Wily that he could attend unmolested and take a few pictures before the police (already armed and waiting outside) tried to arrest him. It was really for the best as the mad scientist would have tried to crash regardless and this way they could possibly mitigate property damage since surely an escape while already outside would be less damaging than trying to force their way inside.

6.8 (Valentine Meikin)

"What are you building?" Rock asked Dr. Light, as he noticed his father constructing something under a cloth sheet.

"A robot I WANT Doctor Wily to steal." Dr. Light admitted with a smirk.

"So, Let's turn it on..." Bass declared, "Let's see what Dr. Light's latest project is..."

As the robot turned on, it took out a clipboard from a compartment inside it, and adjusted a pair of small glasses on it's nose.

"So, you are ze doctor known as Albert Wily, yes?" The robot asked.

"Yes..." Dr. Wily declared to the human-looking robot.

"My name is Psychiatric Man. Let us talk about your reasons for attempting to destroy everything..." The robot began.

The following morning, Bass delivered the remains of Psychiatric Man to Dr. Light's house.

"...Between you and me, I'd rebuild him," Bass deadpanned, "He was only destroyed when the bad doctor took offense..."

He also handed them a clipboard. They treated it with all the respect it deserved.

Roll eventually sealed in it in her subspace pocket after her brothers finished commenting on Wily's various mental issues.

6.9 (OathToOblivion)

Rock stared. He had opened the door only to see the broken form of Rush was lying not two feet away from him, battered and bent. His IC chip was shattered into pieces, then set on fire. He clenched his eyes shut as coolant started leaking from his eyes.

"WAAAAAAAAALLLLLLLLTTTTTTZZZZ!"

6.10

Blues looked around at sights that were becoming much less familiar to him than they should have been. It was so rare he was home these days and it didn't seem likely to change anytime soon.

'Ah, well,' he thought as he pulled a spare set of shades out of his subspace pocket to wear since the current variant hadn't seen fit to start him with one, *'at least I don't have to suffer through Rock and Roll asking when I'm finally coming home every Lo–where are my shades?'*

Indeed, the shades he was certain he'd pulled out of his subspace pocket weren't in his hand. *'I know I pulled them out...'* he pondered and looked around to see if he'd dropped them by accident. *'It's not like I haven't done it countless times without a problem be–'*

krch

The cracking sound was very faint, but distinct. Blues lifted the foot that corresponded to the audio source and saw a pair of broken shades. Sized for an action figure.

'What?' he thought in confusion and decided to try pulling one of his spare shields out. And there it was. Right in his hand and the proper size for an action figure. *'Wonderful...'* he griped mentally. *'This better be a problem with the Loop rather than my pocket...'*

6.11 (Kevin Convoy)

"I must say Roll, how I do wish things would be different sometimes, if only we could change things." Doctor Light comments. "Never did I enjoy using the term Robot Masters, which was Albert's call. I wanted something smooth and colorful, but he wouldn't settle for

anything that didn't have master somewhere in the title. If only he would put that mind of his to some good…"

"Are you okay father?" Roll replies, shaking her head. This non-looping version of her father was just so…odd and sad at times.

"Its fine Roll, an old man's mind just wanders at times…."

"Oh, okay then," Roll relented. "Have you taken your heart medication yet father? You know how I worry."

"Hmm, is it time already? the man called Thomas Light checked on his always reliable silver pocket watch. "Yup, time for this silly old man to take care of his ticker," the Doctor mused as he wandered off, adjusting his very very cool bow-tie.

6.12

"No," Roll glared at her grinning brother.

Rock continued to grin right back at her.

"I am *not* doing it!" Roll insisted.

The grin didn't dissipate.

"I don't *care* how funny it would be!" she stomped her foot with finality.

Rock didn't lose any of his good humor as he finally replied. "But if we do this, then there's a good chance she won't show up for real. And besides, you should really put that weapon data to use at some point anyway."

Roll glared, fumed for several seconds, and then sighed in defeat. "All right, but you *owe* me for this."

"We built the robot masters to set the new standard," Dr. Light lamented to his robotic children as he wept into his hands. "There is literally *nothing* that can stand up to them! Nobody can stop them now!"

"We can," a new voice that sounded much like his son came from the doorway.

Dr. Light, along with Rock and Roll, looked up at the newcomer. In the doorway was a green and lime armored robot with a yellow 'V' crest on his helmet, a blue shaded visor, and what looked like a large red jackhammer slung over his back. Next to him was a female model clad in black and tan armor that was formed like a dress, with fingers clearly modified to each be an individual energy blaster and a neon pink 'L' in the center of her helmet.

And her face was identical to that of his robot daughter that had been comforting him as he broke down over events.

"Who...?" Rock asked in confusion.

"We're you, technically," the female robot that had Roll's face replied.

"From a future where Dr. Wily has spent years wreaking havoc with stolen inventions and his own mad creations," the one with Rock's voice continued. "We've come back in time to try and prevent the worst of the devastation before it even begins. You can call me Quint."

"And I'm Waltz," the apparently future-Roll introduced herself. "We're here to save the world."

---

6. Frogs

"Gods of the theater, smile on us," the first actor sang.

"You who sit up there stern in judgment,

Smile on us," the second actor addressed the audience directly.

"You who look down on actors..."

"And who doesn't?" the two actors both interrupted their singing to speak the self-deprecatory line together before resuming the melody.

"Bless this yearly festival and smile on us."

"We offer you song and dance."

"We offer you rites and revels."

"We offer you grace and beauty.

Smile on us for this while."

It would surprise many that the two robots known to most of the world as Mega Man and Mega Woman were out in the audience in their civilian identities of Rock and Roll, enjoying a night at the theater with their father. But then, who could begrudge the Light family a night of culture, taking in a musical based on an ancient Greek comedy?

Especially when they left afterwards with grins that some would claim needed mechanical adjustment to remove.

6.14

"Well we're all in the mood for a melody.

And you've got us feeling alright!"

Blues ran his fingers across the keys as the entire room sang along to the final lines of the song and smiled. This hadn't been a bad Loop

so far. He might not be able to partake of the spirits that Eden Hall served, but playing the bar's piano wasn't that bad a way to spend his time. Besides, the patrons all seemed to like his music and Ryo Sasakura, the local Anchor and owner, was a pretty decent guy to work for.

6.15

Dr. Light blinked at the robot dressed in a formal suit that had been waiting outside his door. He didn't recognize the model at all...

"Greetings, sir," the robot bowed politely. "I am Tie Man, designed and programmed by Rock and Roll Light to aid the discerning gentleman in dressing both impeccably and comfortably for all occasions. I am to understand that you have quite the full day ahead of you with your children, so we have not a moment to waste!"

Dr. Light choked back a chuckle as he let the robot work. His two children had really outdone themselves with this, so it would be quite rude to turn their project away.

Blues looked down from his perch on the roof as his siblings and father left for their Father's Day plans, trying to convince himself that the sight didn't make his heart ache.

He'd not returned the Awake signal this Loop, again, telling himself that he wanted to see what his siblings got up to when they thought he wouldn't remember past the Loop. Learning of their little Father's Day project...

He wanted to go down there and join them. But he just–

"The real problem lies in your programming."

–he just couldn't bring himself to actually do it.

6.1 - Shenanigans as required by contract.

6.2 - Okay, who left the gag running?

6.3 - Rule 63 is out in force this time it seems.

6.4 - Really out in force.

6.5 - I'd ask when the electric sheep show up, but that's already baseline for this place. (Sheep Man: DWN-077)

6.6 - Route 66: A road that winds from Chicago to L.A. Rule 66: If it exists, Spacebattles(*) will weaponize it.

6.7 - Congratulations to everyone who graduated recently!

6.8 - Psychiatric Man, Psychiatric Man, does whatever a psychiatric can... In all seriousness though, they aren't poking fun at Dr. Wily (much). They're mostly trying to see if there's anything which could help their reformation efforts on the man.

6.9 - "KHHHHHAAAAAAAAANNNNNN!" (Tagline by OathToOblivion as well. You know this had to be done at least once.)

6.10 - Oh, look, giant robots.

6.11 - And apparently Dr. Light is the eleventh Doctor this time. Now we just have to hope that Dr. Wily doesn't remember being the Master or he might do something like travel to the future and come back with a robot built from advanced technology to send against... Oh, wait, he already does that in the baseline. Nevermind then.

6.12 - Ah, the first mini-me Loop for the Megaverse.

6. Frogs - Youtube search for: The Frogs by Aristophones. It's a pretty funny musical.

6.14 - Blues is the Piano Man. :P

6.15 - I hope you all remember to wish your dad a happy Father's Day!

* - Spacebattles is where I post my snippets before compiling them as well as where I take submissions.

Bonus: The full graduating class of Rock and Roll Light. Only about a hundred names on here were randomly generated in full. The single break indicates separation by aisle in the seating.

[Row 1]

Lily Aensland

Sam Alexander

Elizabeth "Liz" Allan

Sheva Alomar

Lance Alvers

Reika Amamiya

Amara Juliana Olivia Aquilla

Anetta Astil

Mithra Asura

Sally Avril

Ava Ayala

Yai Ayano

Natsu Ayuhara

Anita Baine

Rebecca Baker

Joan Ball

Frances Barnwa

Ripot Battle

Signas Belgrade

Christine Bell

Fiona Belli

Tami Bennett

Jim Osh Bensley

Bud Bison

Joe Black

Juanita Blair

Silvia Blue

Dix Boltz

Dag Boltz

Dez Boltz

Chelsea Bonne

Ed Boone

Courtney Bowen

Max Bright

[Row 2]

Edward "Eddie" Brock

Phillip Brooks

Hobie Brown

Barrett Bullet

Erika Butler

Menart Byrd

Milan Byrd

Luke Cage

Nathaniel Cain

Shu Calbania

Neige Caravan

Harvey Carr

Shawn Carter

Alan Caskett

Darrell Castro

Rebecca Chambers

Ceil Charité

Plum Chase

Kei Chitose

Jasmine Choina

Yuika Circus

Kyle Class

Gerardo Cohen

Julia Collins

Cassie St. Commons

Maria Cook

Carlie Cooper

Jack Corvus

Kalinka Cossack

Ray Crisp

Alouette Croire

Ginger Cruz

Wade Cruz

Jeanne d'Arc

[Row 3]

Roberto Da Costa

David "Speedy" Daisuke

Brandy Daniel

Evan Daniels

Vanessa Dark

Doris Davidson

Christopher Davis

Mary Deacon

Delbert Delgado

Phoebe Deneb

Datta Dhalsim

Mawell Dillon

Roxanne Dixon

Kanesha Dolan

Joe Doppler

Barry Doyle

Robert "Bobby" Drake

Ramiro Drake

Earl Duke

Fred Dukes

Teal Eagle

Elpizo Epsilon

Trish Eva

Girouette Express

Heel Face

Pat Fahran

Edward Falcon

Eguchi Famous

Kay Faraday

Robert Farrell

Double Felton

Ramon Ferrer

Maya Fey

Heather Fitzpatrick

[Row 4]

Sophia Flowers

Fan Fortune

Atlas Foster

Allan Freeman

Jaune French

Tory Froid

Taryn Fujioka

John Gallo

Jorge Garcia

Alia Gate

Cinnamon Gaudile

Amy Gelande

Joseph Gibson

Cynthia Gilbert

Richard Gilmore

Ashe Gleason

Elvis Gold

Vin Gonzales

Arthur Goodall

Ashley Graham

Glory Grant

Ashley Gray

Doreen Green

Henry Green

Jean Grey

Annie Griffin

Shawna Griffith

Kidd Gruff

Prairie Guardian

Amy Guile

Sam Guthrie

Jessica Haggar

Fulin Hakan

Dominick Hale

[Row 5]

Juri Han

Gene Hand

Felicia Hardy

Sharon Harris

Charles Harvey

Shuuichi Hat

Michelle Heart

Ruby Heart

Harry Henderson

Nelly Hendrick

Fred Hernandez

Alan Hero

Ran Hibiki

Janet Hill

Aoi Himezaki

Lucille Hines

Pic Holie

Lilly Hollister

Lumine Holt

Atsuki Homura

Bonnie Hood

Craig Howard

Jerome Hubbard

Aeolus Hudson

Helen Hughes

Zain Hunter

Batsu Ichimonji

Lilly Igarashi

Jason Ionello

Satoru "Prosecutor" Ito

Randy James

Dingo Jawaii

Annie Jet

Gregory Johnson

[Row 6]

Terry Jomon

Jessica Jones

Angela Jones

Angelica Jones

Effie June

Kyosuke Kagami

Missy Kallenback

Hayato Kanzaki

Karin Kanzuki

Sakura Kasugano

Akira Kazama

Jennifer Kelly

Charlie Kelman

Leon Scott Kennedy

Elena Kenya

Ribbita Kero

Isabela Keyes

Shuko Kido

Tora King

Laura Kinney

Calvin Klein

Rosalyn Krantz

Ibuki Kunai

Miyuki Kuroi

Linn Kurosawa

Hoshida Kyuuta

Saffron Lagrano

Cumin Lagrano

Jasmine Lagrano

Tempo LaLinde

Zachary Larson

Norma Lawrence

Sarah Lee

Jubilation Lee

[Row 7]

Mei-Ling Lei-Lin

Hsien-Ko Lei-Lin

Yang Li

Yun Li

Rock Light

Roll Light

Janice Lincoln

Ernest Lindsey

Fong Ling

Glyde Loath

Thetis Lopez

Tiffany Lords

Spider Love

Tami Lucas

Jason Philip Macendale, Jr.

Jamie Madrox

Keiji Maeda

Coil Magnes

Anna Maria Marconi

Anna "Rogue" Marie

Denise Marmalade

Marth Mars

Lady Mary

Robyn Mason

Mel Masters

Sean Matsuda

Duncan Matthews

Grogz Maverick

Dynamo Max

Arthur Maximo

Pietro Maximoff

Jeanette May

Asakura Mayu

Jenny McCarthy

[Row 8]

Janet McCloud

Ruth McDonald

Edward McDonough

Kenny "King" McFarlan

Bruce McGivern

Tina McIntyre

Tiny McKeever

Chad Miles

Simone Miller

June Lin Milliam

Gorou Misaki

Alan Mitchell

Danielle Moonstar

Paula Moore

Miles Morales

Louise Morgan

Don Morgan

Chris Morris

Bruce Morris

Dylan Morton

Ilia Necro

George Nelson

Rokushakudama Nenji

Sherrice Net

Theresa Newton

Sha Shan Nguyen

Rocinolle Nightingale

Hirondelle Nouvelle

Alex O'Hirn

Seymour O'Reilly

Sean Obihiro

Oichi Oda

Oyu Odani

Ammy Okami

[Row 9]

Harry Osborne

Oliver Osnick

Aero Otoranger

Dex Oyama

Roberta Palmer

Peter Parker

Jean Patterson

Theo Payne

Siarnaq Peterson

Doris Petto

Claud Pincer

Grill Pitmaster

Luna Platz

Johnathan Porter

Geoffrey Pratt

Princess Penelope Pride

Cerveau Progress

Katherine Anne "Kitty" Pryde

Irene Psyche

Speed Racer

Regina Raid

Sharo Raika

Danny Rand

Evelyn Ray

Faucon Recrue

Axl Red

Claire Redfield

Michael Redips

Iris Regal

Baryl Regal

Ben Reilly

Colbor Rescue

Allan Richards

Randy Robertson

[Row 10]

Andou Romeda

Hope Romero

Brandon Russell

Rei Saiko

Jin Saotome

Sal Saroma

Sasuke Sarutobi

Nana Savage

Shoma Sawamura

Vanessa Z. Schneider

Rosalie Schneider

Tina Scott

Dark Scythe

Amanda Sefton

Sera Servitor

Gatz Servitor

Troy Shaw

Earnest Sherman

Middy Sigma

Techno Sigma

Olivia Silver

Emily Simmons

Palette Sims

Rahne Sinclair

Dande Six

Paul Smith

John Smith

Tabitha Smith

Dante Sparda

Nathan "Rad" Spencer

Geneva Spencer

Patrick Sprigs

Gwen Stacy

Ele Star

[Row 11]

Charlie Stephens

Ariel Stevens

Ayame Stone

Johnny Storm

Chest Strategy

Andres Strickland

Scott Summers

Ken Suther

Vent Taborsky

Katherine Taylor

Layer Taylor-Perry

Zack Temple

Makoto Tendo

Eugene "Flash" Thompson

Gloria Thompson

Keith Tirado

Luke Todd

Junpei Todoroki

Kai Todoroki

Ieyasu Tokugawa

Todd Tolanski

Bobby Tomlinson

Sandra Torres

Mary Towa

Cody Travers

Beverly Turner

Mamoru Urakawa

Jill Valentine

Grey Van Speybroeck

Rouge Variable

Orihime Vega

Lauren Viper

Solo Von Bluecher

Kurt Wagner

[Row 12]

Hinata Wakaba

Mable Walsh

Sheri Walton

Theresa Ward

Lawrence Washington

Spencer Waters

Mary Jane Watson

Joshua Webster

Charlie Weiderman

Prometheus Weil

Pandora Weil

Frank West

Connie Whaley

Julia Whitepearl

Debra Whitman

Risty Wilde

Kevin Williams

Cody Willis

Bass Wily

Clark Wizard

Leonard Wood

Warren Worthington III

Trucy Wright

Shomei Wu

Son Wukong III

Ling Xiaoyu

Akane Yagyu

Daichi Yumeno

Sora Yumeno

Mega Sonic Part 1

Mega Sonic: Part 1

"Hello?" Hermes picked up the phone in his office.

"Ah, Hermes," the voice of Hephaestus came over the line cheerfully. "Just wanted to let you know that I have that fused Loop scenario you requested finished. I'm sending the parameters over now."

"Excellent, man!" Hermes grinned.

"I took the liberty of arranging both Rock and Roll to be Awake rather than leaving it up to Yggdrasil's whims," Hephaestus continued. "Blues may be a bit more problematic. I've been trying to fix his damaged home Loop indicator with little luck, but trying to load him into Sonic's Loop instead of his home Loop for the fused iteration *should* work."

"Sweet!" Hermes replied. "I can't wait to see Sonic's face when he finally Wakes Up in this."

Rock blinked as he Awoke in the process of offering to shine Dr. Wily's shoes. It wasn't really one of his favorite ways to enter a Loop and he could only be thankful that the apparently buggy nature of his Loop meant his Awakening point was... fluid.

He didn't know what he'd do if he had to Wake Up to this every single Loop.

Regardless, he let events flow naturally while he used the special frequency he and his siblings had arranged to check if they were Awake. Roll's came in at practically the same time he sent his out, fast enough that it wasn't technically a 'response', which was pretty

normal for her. Blues's surprisingly came in as well several long seconds later. Given the delay, he could be all the way on the other side of the planet. (1)

That done, he checked his Loop memories. Looked to be fairly baseline, or as 'baseline' as his Loops ever got he supposed. He and Roll were the first two in the Master series (not counting Blues), built as not only their father's helpers but his children as well. Dr. Wily was still Dr. Light's friend and was acting as usual for him. Same old, same old there.

He was registered to Light Labs, no surprise there, in the city of...

Huh. Station Square of the United Federation. Located on the continent of Soumerca on the planet Mobius.

Rock grinned. He'd been looking forward to seeing Sonic and company again for a while now.

Rock and his sister geared up for the prison transfer of Dr. Wily. It tended to be a toss-up if they could prevent his escape when this happened as the man was *very* good at arranging distractions they couldn't ignore, and even if they succeeded he always had more backup escape plans than they could circumvent. Like the still missing Time Man and Oil Man to name a couple. Still, they went through the motions. One never knew when or how events would change.

As if to prove that statement, the communications console flared to life and the face of a light blue hedgehog with a graying mustache appeared on the screen.

"Emergency!" the Mobian cried over the connection as it glitched from static. "This is Charles Hedgehog in *krchk*opolis! Is anyone there?!"

"Charles!" the voice of Dr. Light exclaimed as he rushed to the monitor. "What the matter?"

"Thomas! Thank goodness! Mobotropolis *skrt-tch*der attack!" the hedgehog relayed frantically. "We need immediate assistance! Ivo's betr*ksh* us!"

"We're on our way, sir!" Rock stepped forward with his sister before the question could even be asked. "Dad, can you–?"

"I'm adjusting the teleporter network now!" Dr. Light replied as he typed furiously. "I can get you to the suburbs, but you'll have to take it from there! Help is on the way old friend!"

"Thank y*kshtchkkk*"

Rock looked around as they finished teleporting. Buildings were on fire and mobians were running around in a panic. Weapons fire could be heard in the distance and there was one heck of an ominous floating fortress overhead.

"I don't think we're going to make it to the police escort," Roll observed.

"Nope," Rock agreed. "Start helping the civilians to safety. I'll see what I can do about the attackers."

"Right."

Rock paused as he heard something from a nearby damaged building and moved to investigate. It sounded like crying.

Tabling the matter of fighting the invasion for the moment, he went to investigate and found a young lapine mobian pinned under the rubble. Her legs and an arm were trapped and he was pretty certain they were broken and possibly crushed. (2)

"Easy there," he told her, "I'm gonna help you out. Just stay calm an–"

"You get away from her you ro-butt!" was the only warning he got before something slammed into him. The thing ricocheted off and came for another attack, but he managed to catch it before it hit. The object turned out to be a curled up young hedgehog with a familiar face and attitude. "Let me go you badnik!"

"I don't have time for this," Rock sighed. His friend didn't recognize him, which meant he wasn't Awake. At least not yet. "Look, Sonic right?"

"Wha–?"

"Your uncle's an old friend of my dad, but that's not important," he gestured to the rabbit girl. "She's hurt and needs a doctor. Fast. Can you get her there?"

"Hey, fast is my middle name!" Sonic's tune had changed pretty quickly, but Rock wasn't about to question it. He simply lifted the rubble off of the young girl long enough for Sonic to pick her up, the girl holding back a cry of pain as he did, and run her to treatment. The rough handling might not be ideal for her condition, but hopefully getting treatment that much sooner would make up for it.

It was time he tracked down the guy in charge and put an end to this before anyone else got hurt.

"Your *majesty* , members of the royal council," the portly man with a huge orange mustache and limbs so incongruously thin that one couldn't help but think of noodles taunted as he stepped over the rubble and into the throne room flanked by several robots, "I am now in control of all Mobotropolis! Swear fealty to me and I may let you keep your free will!"

"Never!" His Majesty King Maximillion Acorn returned defiantly.

"Your choice," the man grinned sinisterly. "Your last choice of course, but your choice nonetheless."

"I beg to differ!" a voice called out and the robots around the would-be conqueror fell to energy blasts before the man could react.

"Mega Woman to Mega Man," Roll used call signs given the situation. "Civilians have been evacuated. I'm proceeding to the flying fortress."

"Copy that," Rock replied as he stared down the mad, in more ways than one, man. "Now, Dr. Ivo 'Eggman' Robotnik I presume?"

"You insolent little...!" the so-named man fumed. "I'll see you reduced to scrap, do you hear me?!"

"Cut the theatrics doc," Rock wasn't in the mood for this. Rampant destruction was something he was more used to than most, but seeing pointless loss of life always killed his good humor. "We both know I could just shoot you and be done with it."

"H-hey now..." Dr. Eggman began sweating nervously at the reminder the robot was armed and he wasn't. "Let's not be hasty! If you kill me, you still have to deal with my robot army!"

"And I could," Rock glared at the man. "I could walk right out there now and mow them down one at a time. Then I'd go up to your flying fortress and take it apart from the inside out. And the only question... is whether my sister will have already done it by the time I get there." (3)

The Eggman gulped as the small blue robot casually dispatched several more of his robots who had tried to rescue their master. All while keeping one weapon trained on him.

"But that's going to just destroy more stuff that I'm sure these fine people would rather stay standing," Rock told the man. "So I'm giving you a one time offer: Order your forces to retreat right now and you can go with them."

"And if I refuse?" Dr. Eggman tried to regain some psychological footing.

"Then we're back to me shooting you," Rock bluffed. He didn't kill if he could help it. He'd see the man thrown in prison, sure, probably have to rough him up a little in the process of restraining him, but he wouldn't kill him.

"..." Dr. Eggman pulled out a communicator. "All units retreat."

"Sir...?" a confused voice replied.

"I SAID RETREAT!" Eggman screamed into the device. "THAT'S AN ORDER!"

"Y-yes sir!"

"This isn't over..." the Eggman glared at the blue robot before leaving.

As the leaders of Mobotropolis began to realize that the attack had been well and truly halted, a yellow beam of light landed in the room and resolved itself into a feminine version of their savior. Only yellow instead of blue.

"What did you do to his flying fortress?" Rock asked his sister.

"After I heard what you were saying, I went for the landing systems," Roll grinned. "The moment he tries to put that thing down it's going to crash hard."

"Good, that should keep him busy for a while," Rock nodded before turning to the king. "Your majesty, I apologize but I can't stay and

explain. There are still areas that could contain injured people, and my sister and I need to start finding them sooner rather than later."

"Of... of course," King Acorn replied, still in a daze over events. "Please, help my subjects in whatever way you can."

"...and in light of the fact that Dr. Ivo 'Eggman' Robotnik is still at large, King Maximillion Acorn and the Royal Council would like to formally request that the robot heroes known as Mega Man and Mega Woman return to help protect the citizens," Charles relayed over the monitor.

"As much as I would love to accommodate you Charles," Dr. Light replied from his end, "my children are free willed and capable of making their own decisions. You will have to ask them."

"Actually, dad," Rock entered the room and the conversation, "we already talked about it. Sir Charles Hedgehog?"

"Please, call me Chuck, my boy," the mobian chuckled. "Walkers know I could never get your father to."

"Of course Sir Chuck," Rock grinned as the hedgehog groaned and his dad chuckled. "Anyway, we can't both come. You see, Station Square has its own mad scientist problem by the name of Dr. Wily who's escaped custody and remains at large. But you're right that Dr. Robotnik is a problem as well. So my sister and I talked it over and she's going to stay here and protect Station Square. But I would be happy to come and help fight against Dr. Robotnik and his forces."

"Hey Mega Dude!" the voice of the child version of Sonic greeted cheerfully. "I heard the news! So you're gonna hang around and kick Ro-butt-nik's massive ugly tush when he's being bad? Way past cool! Come on! You gotta meet the gang!"

Rock chuckled as he followed the hyperactive boy Sonic at a more sedate pace.

"Come oooonnn!" Sonic whined from where he stood with a group of friends. "You're being sloooow!"

"Just enjoying the peace," Rock smiled back as he caught up.

"Eh, that's cool," Sonic waved him off before zipping over to a finely dressed girl ground squirrel. "Anyway, this is Princess Sal. You met her old man already," Sonic zipped over to the two boys, a coyote and a walrus, of the group. "This is Ant and Boomer here, and that little guy over there with Rosie is Tails," Sonic gestured to a smiling woman holding a toddler fox with two tails.

"What about the girl we saved?" Rock asked as the thought occurred to him. He'd never checked up on her after the attack.

"I got her to the docs fast and they saved her life, but they had to am-poo-tat her arm and legs," Sonic answered quietly before perking back up. "But Uncle Chuck says he's gonna make her new ones! So she's gonna be a sea-berg!"

"Cyborg," Rock corrected.

"Yeah, one-a those!" Sonic agreed. "But hey, we need to finish introducing you! Guys, this is the Mega Dude who saved the whole city!"

"Actually," Rock chuckled as he dismissed his armor and appeared in civilian attire, "My name is Rock. And I'm pleased to meet you all."

"That's cool, man!" Sonic grinned.

"Yeah, Rock rocks!" (4) the other children, the future Freedom Fighters he'd met before, agreed enthusiastically.

Sonic had to do his best to keep himself calm. He and his other friends had finally, *finally* , been approved as full-fledged Freedom Fighters! And this was their first real official mission with their 'big bro' Rock, the mega hero Mega Man. Which clearly made it much better than all the times they'd snuck off to help him *un* officially. (5)

Rotor (no longer going by 'Boomer') had shown great skill with machines and computers and had learned mad skills from Uncle Chuck alongside pumping iron at the gym to boost his natural walrus strength. Tails had been right there with him (when he wasn't chasing after Sonic) proving to be quite the child genius.

Between the two of them and Uncle Chuck, as well as Rock's dad consulting on occasion, Bunnie had gained some sweet upgrades to her cybernetic limbs each time she went in to get them adjusted to make sure the tech that allowed them to shift to match her growing body was working right. The girl was shaping up to be a real powerhouse.

Antoine on the other hand had eventually mastered his easily spooked nerves and was perhaps the youngest guard in generations, being appointed as Sal's personal bodyguard by her dad the King (and promptly told by said princess that she could take care of herself, thank you very much).

And of course Princess Sally wasn't going to be left behind. Sonic was willing to bet that their group being approved for missions against Eggman was partly due to the fact that they all, Sal included, kept sneaking out to do it anyway. King Max probably figured he'd have fewer heart attacks by officially sanctioning them so he knew what his daughter was up to. That new computer she had, NICOLE, was pretty useful too. Even if she wouldn't tell him where it came from.

If only he could figure out how to keep that Amy girl from following them around... He didn't have anything against girls, but her loud declarations that he'd one day be her husband made him somewhat nervous. He'd never even *met* her before she did that the first time!

Now if only Rock didn't insist on doing things slow all the time… (6)

"Come oonnn!" Sonic whined. "I coulda been in and outta there by now!"

"You could have also been a smoking crater," Rock sighed. "Dr. Eggman's upgraded his defenses again."

"I can outrun anything Robuttnik can shoot at me!" the hedgehog bragged.

"Yeah, but it only takes one lucky shot," Rock retorted as he finished his scan. "Forgive me if I like my friends in one piece."

"Yeah, yeah," Sonic waved him off in begrudging admittance of the point and tapped his communicator. "Hey, Sal, how are things going on your end?"

"We're sending you the patrol patterns now," the voice of Princess Sally Acorn came over. "Dr. Eggman's new factory is pumping out badniks at an even faster pace than before, as well as over twice the pollutants as his last factory."

"I swear, this guy enjoys poisoning everything he touches," Rock grumbled. At least Dr. Wily had the good sense to deal in cleaner technologies when possible. Why bother conquering the world if you just turned it into an unlivable dump in the process? (7)

"No kidding," Sonic agreed as he began stretching in preparation for the attack. Nearby, Rock's robo-dog Rush perked up as he recognized the sign for imminent activity and came out of his standby state. "I..."

Sonic paused mid-stretch and blinked. He then turned slowly to face Rock and the robot saw his expression had shifted. It seemed older, wiser (though not by much), more mature (just a teensy bit).

"Good morning, 'little blue'," Rock smirked. Looks like Sonic was finally Awake.

"What does that..." Sonic started before blinking in realization and crossing his arms. Apparently his Loop memories had just integrated. "Funny 'big blue'."

Rock snorted in amusement at the second part of the nicknames he and Sonic had apparently picked up.

"Hey, Sal," the hedgehog tapped his communicator again, "You all Awake over there?"

"Bright-eyed and bushy tailed," the voice of Bunnie replied. "Y'all slept in this Loop hon!"

"Yeah, yeah," Sonic griped as Rock chuckled at the barb. Sal tended to Wake Up right about when she got NICOLE, especially after that Loop she had with Nanoha where 'COLE became her soul-bound intelligent device, and the rest of the Freedom Fighters were typically right behind her. "What's the plan for the Loop?"

"You spoil us, Zoneec," Antoine replied, "always lettink us choose how zees thinks go."

"I miss you guys when you're not Awake," Sonic replied and paused. "Well, mostly I miss Sal and the way she can't keep her hands off me. You're comic relief either way, Ant."

"Keep dreaming, Sonic," Sally replied, though some snickers could be heard on the other end. Sal gal must be blushing... He still had it.

"You know you love me," Sonic grinned. (8)

"May the heavens have mercy on us all," Sonic could hear Rotor's smirk over the line.

"Ha-ha you all," Sally reprimanded. "Anyway, I was thinking a baseline challenge run for now. Get a feel for how Rock's presence

alters the dynamic before we start pulling anything big."

"Right-a-roony!" Sonic agreed before turning to Rock. "Ready to see how we do things in this neck of the multiverse?"

"Try to keep up," Rock smirked before jumping on Rush in jet mode and speeding off.

Sonic blinked, then smiled. That had sounded like a challenge.

Sally huffed as she got to her feet. She'd asked Sonic and Rock to let her take on Ixis Naugus solo this Loop. She'd been getting better at holding her own against the heavy hitters of her Loop, even used her new super form a few times. In any case, Rock had agreed to stay out so long as she wasn't in imminent mortal danger and Sonic had backed the decision.

"Well that was quite the pathetic display, Princess," the evil wizard sneered. "I do hope your companions will prove more worthwhile."

"We're not done yet," Sally glared back. "NICOLE?"

Understood. Set Up.

Ixis blinked as the device shifted into a more weapon-like appearance. What sorcery was this?

Firing lock cancelled.

"Good," Sally leveled the device in his direction and the magical build-up made the foul sorcerer's hair stand on end. "Load cartridge."

Cartridge loaded. Blaster one engaged.

"Fire." (9)

Knuckles shook his head as he stood on the shore of the floating island. Which wasn't currently floating.

"It figures," he told the red figure next to him. "We stop Dr. Eggman from releasing Chaos 0 and Dr. Wily sneaks past while we're busy and does it anyway."

The shaded face of Proto Man, mentor to the echidna prior to his Awakening, stared across the water at his former home of Station Square, scarf flapping in the breeze. "Eh, the two were bound to step on each other's plans at some point. I'm actually more surprised by the fact that Wily's built his own Skull Fleet this Loop. He usually just sticks to robot masters."

"And of course he manages to shatter the Master Emerald despite the fact that he hasn't had any schemes involving it, or the Chaos Emeralds for that matter, before now," Knuckles shook his head in begrudging amazement. "Seriously, what's this Wily guy's IQ anyway?"

"Rock says it depends on what test and scale you're using. Roll likes to say it's 666."

"Nah, Eggman's got that one reserved. Call it at least 667."

"I'm surprised you're giving my resident mad scientist the higher number."

"The fact that you can't find Wily's bases by following the trail of filth earns him a few points." (10)

"I was hoping I'd get to visit home under better circumstances!" Super Mega Man yelled at Super Sonic as they and Super Mega Woman faced off against the kaiju-sized Perfect Chaos Devil. (11)

"Hey, at least the docs stopped fighting!" Super Sonic yelled back.

"Only because Chaos blew both their fleets out of the sky!" Super Mega Woman retorted as she fired a super-sized charge shot at the rampaging water god.

"So, you're the ultimate lifeform?" the black-armored robot sneered. "I'm not impressed."

"Hmph," Shadow snorted derisively while trying to hide his interest. He and Bass hadn't really had the time for a proper throw-down last time they met. He normally liked to buck Eggman's plans for the ARK, but for a chance to arrange a duel with his obvious counterpart from Mega Man's universe? He'd play along with events for now. "Your pathetic mewlings are meaningless. Stay out of my way."

Yep, that looked like it was going to get Bass good and riled up for later. (12)

Explosions rattled Space Colony ARK as two heavily powered engines of destruction did their best to pound each other into oblivion.

"DIE YOU SENILE OLD TWIT!"

"FAT CHANCE YOU ROTUND SACK OF TOXIC WASTE!"

Contrary to what one might expect from recent events, the devastation was not due to Shadow or Bass. It was due to the actions of two notorious mad scientists, their personal battle crafts, and a distinct enmity for each other since the events several months prior involving the living water guardian Chaos.

"YOU DARE SPEAK THAT WAY TO A GENIUS LIKE ME?!" Eggman yelled as he fired missiles from his Eggwalker.

"YOU?! A GENIUS?!" Wily screeched as his Skull Saucer returned fire with homing balls of energy. "YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A FILTHY

HACK WHO POISONS EVERYTHING HE TOUCHES!"

"THE WORLD IS MINE BY RIGHT TO DO WITH AS I PLEASE!" Eggman frothed as he opened fire with his machine guns.

"NO!" Wily's visage pulsed with rage as he rained down laser fire in return. "THE WORLD IS MINE! AND I WON'T HAVE SOME FOURTH-RATE COMMUNITY COLLEGIATE LIKE YOU TURN IT INTO A PILE OF GARBAGE!" (13)

"COMMUNITY COLLE–?!" Eggman's retort cut off as his fury grew so great that it prevented his speech. **" *DIE!* "**

"YOU FIRST!"

Shadow blinked from his place outside the ARK, idly wondering how a breathable environment was maintained out here most Loops, as one of the walls on the space station was blown out rather forcefully. "Well, the doctors seem to be having fun."

"I swear, I cannot take my dad *anywhere* ," Bass rubbed his face in aggravation, wondering why he'd thought involving his creator in this fiasco had sounded like a good idea.

Shadow smirked superiorly. "Yes, he's *much* too excitable to have made you my match. You should run along before you get hurt, little robot."

Bass stiffened and turned dangerously towards the dark hedgehog. Yep, that had refocused his attention nicely. "Oh, I think you'll be the one getting hurt, hedgehog."

"Big talk, from a weakling," Shadow performed a picture-perfect sneer.

"I'll show you who's weak!" Bass charged and swung his fist wildly.

Even in the baseline, such an unskilled attack wouldn't have come close to hitting Shadow. Honestly, even he had to admit that using his Chaos Control power to warp out of the way was just showing off, but then he rather liked doing that.

Bass turning immediately in his direction and opening fire with rapid shots from his buster almost caught the dark guardian off guard.

'He was able to track Chaos Control?' Shadow thought with interest. He wouldn't be the first to have done so, or even a member of an exclusive club when the Loops were considered, but it was still an impressive feat.

Shadow dodged as Bass closed in again, evading a blow that put a rather severe dent in the metal where he had been standing, and used his speed to increase the distance between them.

"This is the great 'ultimate lifeform?" Bass fired more shots after him. "A coward who can only run?!"

Shadow's eyes narrowed as he turned to race back towards his opponent. He'd heard that kind of insult so many times that it had almost lost meaning, and still Bass had managed to make it sting.

Remembering what he'd heard of Sonic's fight against this robot, he was prepared for the power kick leveled at his center of mass (14) and vaulted over it and into an inverted kick of his own. A kick which Bass caught. A twist of the robot's arm destroyed his balance and left him open to the spinning backhand that followed, sending him crashing into a nearby crate.

Shadow pulled himself out the next moment and wiped the dust from his face. "Not bad," he grinned back at his opponent. "But let's see if you can handle it for real!"

With that, Shadow charged forward, and saw a grin identical to his on Bass's face as he charged in kind.

The fight had escalated as fights are wont to do. Shadow had resorted to some of the Chaos powers he normally wouldn't discover until later in the timeline and Bass had called upon and united with Treble.

It was brutal. It was devastating. It was glorious.

It was being interrupted by the gigantic cybernetic Biolizard fusing with the space colony and forcing it into a rapid descent towards the planet below.

'Right, this happens,' Shadow wanted to slap himself for forgetting about the imminent threat to the planet in his pursuit of a worthy opponent.

"Hope you guys don't mind if we play through," Sonic said as he rode up on the back of Mega Man in his super adaptor form, the rest of the Chaos Emeralds in tow. "We'll just give ugly here a dose of the Super twosome and then you guys can get back to beating the snot out of each other."

"Screw that!" Bass growled. "This thing thinks it can interrupt our duel and then destroy our planet?! We're taking it out with you!"

Shadow thought for a moment and realized he didn't have anything real substantial to add to that and so settled for nodding.

The Finalhazard, as it would come to be known, was barely a threat to one super-form being. It could only be considered a challenge to two by virtue of the time limit the falling space station created. Four at once was just overkill.

Shadow still managed to duplicate his fake death from atmospheric freefall from the baseline, or at least enough that Bass bought it... for now. After all, he really didn't want to risk having to explain why a gigantic chunk of the station was now missing after one of Super Bass's shots went wide.

Princess Sally Acorn looked over the letter that had just been delivered to the Freedom Fighters. The contents... were not encouraging.

"Dear Team Mega Sonic," she read, "Guess what? We've finally decided to put aside our differences and together developed the ultimate weapon! In three days, the world shall fall before our combined genius! Think you can stop us? We welcome the attempt! Feel free to bring your friends, it won't make any difference! Sincerely Dr. Eggman and Dr. Wily."

"Even discountin' that we lived through similar events afore, that just don't smell right, Sally girl," Bunnie Rabbot-D'Coolette, cyborg powerhouse extraordinaire, folded her arms pointedly. "Those two might be all mad scientist-y and out to conquer the world and all, but they can't *stand* each other. Doc Wily's all perfectionist, gotta have everythin' just so, includin' the world he's takin' over."

"And the way Eggman pollutes everything as a matter of course doesn't sit well with him," Rotor added. "And Eggman, well, the way his brain is wired, you're either with him or against him."

"Indeed," Antoine nodded. "It would seem ze game, she is two feet, no?"

Everyone stared at the coyote swordsman for a moment. (15)

"Sugah-twan, ah reckon ya do that kinda stuff on purpose," Bunnie shook her head at her husband's antics.

"I have no idea what you are talkink about," Antoine sniffed with exaggerated offense, but no one missed the 'secret' grin on his face.

"In any case," Sally refocused everyone's attention on the matter, "this needs looking into. We've done this before, so we know the usual drill. Metal Sonic is probably manipulating things behind the scenes in order to gather the world's best heroes and copy their

data, becoming a supreme mechanical lifeform. The question is, are we ready to join in this time?"

"Of course you are Aunt Sally!" Tails chimed in from where he'd been doing maintenance on the Tornado. "Rotor's got the power slot down pat, either you or Bunnie can be the flying member with your tech, Antoine's gotten pretty speedy since he had that Loop training against the Roadrunner (16), and with Rock here this Loop I bet we're probably going to have teams of four instead of three so there's room for everyone!"

"I gotta say I've been kind of looking forward to this," Rock admitted. "Sonic even insisted on practicing how to fire his Spin Dash form with my buster in preparation. And... Hold on, I just got a message from Roll. Looks like Amy's roped my sister into helping her chase after Sonic while also helping Big and Cream look for Froggy and a chao named Chocola."

"Honestly, she does this every time Sonic takes vacation time," Sally rubbed her forehead.

"Eggman seems to intrude on Sonic's downtime fairly often as well," NICOLE added. "Though that would seem to be more poor timing than deliberate action." (17)

"I know," Sally groaned. "It's just... I think Amy's obsession with Sonic is actually worse when she's not Awake. And no, I haven't forgotten the 'bride wars' Loop (18). In any case, Rock? Tails? Take the Tornado and go get Knuckles, then go find Sonic and start going after Eggman and Wily's supposed project and see if you can't derail it before it gets off the ground. We'll get started here on our end."

"Roger that princess!" Rock saluted playfully.

Rouge often wondered if their Loop had it out for Shadow.

Though he no longer suffered the kind of severe burnout and amnesia after the original ARK incident like in the baseline or most variants, he still managed to end up in one of Dr. Eggman's stasis pods after facing Finalhazard half the time he was Awake. Some of the events that resulted in such an outcome would have done Rube Goldberg proud.

This time was, thankfully, something much simpler. From a spycam she'd set up ahead of time (mostly because she liked to tease Shadow about some of the sillier things that landed him in this situation (19)), she'd seen that he'd simply had a bad landing. Something had knocked him off balance on the way down from space and he'd crashed instead of landing safely.

And then some of Eggman's bots had come to collect him while he was unconscious. Which had led to her searching him out, again, and her current predicament.

"You sure he's here?" her partner for this heist asked for the umpteenth time while his pet robo-wolf stalked around just as impatiently.

"For the last time, Bass, *yes* , I'm sure," she sniped as she began cracking the lock on the reinforced door. "Just be on the lookout for any security."

As the door opened and Rouge spotted the stasis pod holding Shadow, she mused that Bass insisting on helping her find the dark hedgehog had been a little unexpected, but nothing she couldn't adjust for. The robot insisted it was because they hadn't properly finished their duel, but Rouge could tell there was a grudging sort of respect as well. The kind Shadow tended to have for his own rivals. In any case, it would certainly be a different take on these events.

Assuming Wily's son managed to survive E-123 Omega first. (20)

Vector was leaning back in his chair in the Chaotix Detective Agency's office, listening to some chill beats and covertly staring at his buddy Espio while headbanging to disguise his interest. If it wasn't for the fact that their little bet had turned out to be pretty fun, he might actually be mad at the chameleon ninja.

A while back, Vector had gotten bored with how predictable and easy many of their cases were getting. While he still liked getting paid for the work, he'd also come to enjoy the mental challenge of some of their tougher cases as well. The problem was that most of their cases tended to involve more of the legwork and action part of the job than actually puzzling out clues. One day he'd been griping over how he wanted more mental challenges than physical for a change and Espio had retorted with their current bet.

The bet went like so: Espio would, when Awake, practice his 'stealth looper' skills and try to act like his baseline self. Vector, by contrast, would, when Awake, attempt to deduce if his friend was Awake or not. Vector got a point every time he caught Espio Awake, and Espio got a point if he made it the whole Loop without an Awake Vector catching on. To make it even more interesting, Vector lost a point any time he accused an Unawake Espio of looping and Espio lost one if an Unawake Vector caught on. It had proven rather challenging so far. Espio might have a comfortable lead for now, but it wasn't a decisive one either. (21)

"Guys, guys! Guess who's here!" the voice of Charmy Bee, most definitely not Awake this time and who couldn't act that way to save his life, yelled as he burst through the door and straight for Vector. Caught off guard from observing Espio, Vector yelped and fell out of his chair as Espio calmly turned to regard the second individual leaning against the doorframe in amusement.

"Nice to see you, Blues," the chameleon ninja who might or might not be Awake greeted. "Haven't really seen you since, when was it? The Dark Brotherhood incident?"

"Yeah, and it was Metal Sonic Kai before that, when we formed the Chaotix," Vector recalled as he rubbed his head and sat up. Shade and her clan weren't always predictable on when they'd show up. Sometimes it was later in the Loop and sometimes it was early. The latter was usually when Shade was pink and named Julie-Su, but not this time. "You don't drop by that much Pogo Man, so what's up? You got a case or somethin'?"

"Yeah, a case!" Charmy cheered.

"As a matter of fact, I might," Blues finished shaking his head at the nickname the crocodile insisted on calling him and brought out a package. A somewhat familiar package.

'That time already, eh?' Vector thought.

Roll wanted to facepalm as Cream, and her chao Cheese, were nearly blown away out over the ocean. A little girl the rabbit might be, and not Awake this time from what Roll could tell, but she had proven to be quite the formidable warrior in her own right a few times. And then she was nearly taken out by a *stiff breeze* ...

Fortunately, Big was on hand with his fishing pole to snag the girl before she was blown halfway to the next continent, along with the only clue of what had happened to two of their group's friends.

Of course Roll had memorized the picture, but no one seemed to be asking her.

"Froggy," Big lamented as he looked over the blurry photo at the image of his pet amphibian that had once bonded with Chaos being kidnapped.

"Chocola..." Cheese echoed the sentiment as she looked over the other figure, a chao, being kidnapped in the photo. (22)

Kidnapped by someone that looked remarkably like Sonic, if a blurry black and white photo of a hedgehog's back from a high angle could be considered positive identification. But it was enough to garner the almost obsessive interest of the final member, and self-proclaimed leader, of their group, Amy Rose.

Honestly, Roll found it somewhat disturbing that the pink hedgehog girl could be described with both the words 'hero' and 'stalker' without sounding ironic or snarky. Those were two concepts which should *not* go together in her opinion.

'Just remind yourself this isn't about her creepy crush on Sonic,' Roll told herself. *'You're not doing this for her, you're doing it for a little girl and a nice guy who miss their friends. Not for the hammer-wielding stalker girl.'*

"Hey Shade," Mighty greeted the female echidna as she and a green armored figure landed nearby, "who's your friend?"

"I-i-it's a S-s-sniper Joe!" Mighty's fellow Chaotix member Ray stuttered in shock as he got a better look at Shade's companion, and noticed a smaller yellow object hovering over him. "A-a-a-and h-he's got a MET!"

"Peace friend Ray," Shade held out her hands calmingly. (23) "This is not your average Joe. And these are not average circumstances that cause our paths to cross."

"S-so th-th-that's the renegade Joe unit Rock t-told us about?" Ray offered.

Mighty raised an eyebrow. He'd heard from Rock that his place might have gained a very unexpected looper recently, but the robot had also said that none of them had managed to find out for sure. Assuming there *was* a Joe unit looping, he never liked to stick around for long and didn't say much when he did.

"Possibly," Shade allowed, "but that is of minor importance at the moment."

"Indeed," a voice was transmitted from the flight-capable MET hovering near the Joe unit. "I understand you are all part of the Chaotix Detective Agency, correct? I have heard good things about you and require your services."

Mighty exchanged glances with Ray and Shade. This sounded like what Vector and the rest of the team usually got roped into. And Shade was sort of an off-and-on member of the team in any case, some Loops she was, and some she wasn't.

"And I can pay handsomely."

'And that's that...' the super-strong armadillo sighed to himself. *'If Vector learned I turned down a job that promised payment, I'd never hear the end of it.'*

He looked at Ray and Shade again, and considered the quiet Joe for a moment. If the robot was looping, they had a team of four Awake members for this case. If not...

'I have a bad feeling about this...'

Rock and Tails calmly maintained their flight, atop Rush and in the Tornado respectively, as Sonic read the letter, while running backwards just to show off, and Knuckles reclined calmly in the back seat of the plane.

"Well, this sounds like quite the party invitation!" the hedgehog grinned. "It'd be a shame not to attend and see what new twists await us!"

"The heck?" Blues blurted in confusion as he and the Chaotix faced off against a flying machine that looked like Bliking.

Being piloted by Dr. Wily.

"Something the matter, Pogo Man?" Vector asked as the mad doctor taunted them. If nothing else, it was a change from what they normally faced off against.

"Yeah," Blues readied his shield as the Bliking look-alike's wings extended to reveal weapons. "Dr. Wily never engages in person this early in one of his schemes."

"That a fact?" Vector mused.

"Interesting..." Espio muttered to himself.

"Watch out!" Charmy yelled as he pointed at the craft. "Here he comes!"

"Dr. Eggman, are you up to no good again?" Amy Rose accused as she and the others faced off against Dr. Eggman and his hawk-like war plane.

As Cream and Big childishly admonished the madman for being 'bad', Roll mused that the man had a definitively different approach to this sort of thing than Dr. Wily. The rotund would-be conqueror liked to take a very 'hands-on' approach to his conquests, insisting on piloting most of his war machines into battle personally. Only the fact that his personal craft was detachable from his war machines allowed him to escape time and time again.

As she went through the motions of antagonizing the Chaotix (with guest star Proto Man), mostly for the benefit of her Unawake teammates, Rouge almost felt sorry for the rag-tag band of detectives.

After all, once they'd finally gotten everything straight with Omega, he and Bass had hit it off *frighteningly* well. One overly enthusiastic

engine of destruction was enough to make her feel pity for all but the most powerful and vile opponents they would ever face.

"Preparing to unleash fiery destruction of unnecessary proportions," Eggman's renegade masterpiece monotoned.

"Now you're talking!" the Black Prince grinned back as he and Omega opened fire. (24)

Two was overkill no matter how you sliced it.

As the Freedom Fighters clashed with Shade and her team of Chaotix (plus a Joe unit), Sally had to shake her head at how cheesy the dialogue they'd traded had been. They'd tried to make their clash believable to whoever was on the other end of the MET relaying instructions to the second Chaotix team, and it seemed to have worked. Though the fact that the client wasn't here in person might have helped with that. Sally certainly wouldn't have bought what she'd participated in.

A narrowly dodged swipe from Shade's blades refocused her attention on the battle at hand. Mock or no, there were real weapons being thrown around.

"A-heh..." Sonic gulped with (slightly) exaggerated nervousness as the figure across from him and his team finished registering. "Amy! What a... surprise!"

The pink hedgehog just continued on like he hadn't said anything. "This time there's no way out of marrying me!"

"Are you really going along with this?" Rock whispered to his sister over their helmets' comms.

"Partially," Roll whispered back with an audible smirk. "After all, we haven't sparred in a while, bro."

"Friends of yours?" Shadow asked Bass, currently in his super adaptor form, as the last of eight figures finished surrounding the group known as 'Team Dark'.

"Surrender in the name of the Eggman-Wily empire!" the bat-winged individual among their opponents declared.

"Yeah, right," Bass scoffed as if the robot hadn't spoken. "I don't care what they look like, these are not my dad's robot masters. If they were, they would know I *don't* surrender."

"Scans indicate opposing models have been factory constructed," Omega intoned.

"We are the seventh squad of the new Eggman-Wily Empire!" the false Shade Man declared again as the apparent replica's of Wily's seventh set of robot masters readied themselves for battle. "Resistance is futile!"

"We don't have time for this," Rouge groaned.

"Well, then it's a good thing dad upgraded my copy chip," Bass grinned as he patted Shadow on the back.

"Did you just...?" the dark hedgehog stared at the robot accusingly.

"Hey, I liked those chaos powers of yours when we threw down," Bass grinned as he held up the red Chaos Emerald the group had found early on in this endeavor. "Thought I'd take them for a spin."

"Hmph..." Shadow grinned as he hopped up on Bass's back and placed his own hand on the emerald while Rouge air lifted Omega over their heads. "Then let's show them how 'futile' our resistance is..."

"CHAOS..." they both yelled as the eight robot master replicas began to charge.

"...CONTROL/BLAST!" Shadow and Bass finished respectively, freezing the eight in place even as a wave of red power rushed out, followed by a massive 360 degree barrage from Omega to seal the fate of all eight opponents.

Rouge had enough time to land and begin filing her nails before the temporal freezing effect ended and the eight robots were finally able to explode spectacularly.

"First Dr. Eggman in his Egg Hawk and now these guys," Mighty observed as he and the rest of the Chaotix (plus one) broke off their engagement from what he recognized as eight of Dr. Wily's robot masters and put some distance between them. The set used in his second invasion if Mighty didn't miss his guess. Though they weren't fighting as intelligently as the armadillo would have expected. "Certainly looks like the two are working together."

"I WOULD NEV–I mean it's all clearly a trick of some sort," the voice of their client hastily corrected itself from the MET that hovered nearby. "You must deal with them quickly and move on!"

"Understood," the Sniper Joe responded curtly as he knelt down with his shield over his head. "Engaging Hammer model hydraulics for team maneuver."

"Ready, Shade? Ray?" Mighty asked.

"Always," Shade replied as she hopped onto the shield.

"Y-yes..." Ray responded more hesitantly as he joined her, with Mighty a moment later.

"Launch!" Mighty ordered and felt the shield shoot he and the other two up into the air like a springboard. Ray grabbed both him and Shade at the apex and flung them even higher. As they reached the new apex, Mighty curled into a ball and felt Shade throw him straight at the center of their gathered opponents.

"MIGHTY IMPACT!" he yelled right before he hit. (25)

The massive blast of sound from the group blew back the Chaotix's eight opponents, their sparking and damaged bodies not rising again.

"That wasn't so hard," Vector observed as he put his mike away. "Doc Wily usually make 'em this easy?"

"Not a chance," Blues replied as he knelt next to the Shadow Man replica and examined the sparking machinery. The third set of Dr. Wily's robot masters could never have fallen this easily.

"Didn't think so," the crocodile detective folded his arms.

"An astute observation," the voice of their client came over the walkie talkie he carried, "but of little consequence at the moment. Your quarry lies on the other side of the canyon. You must make haste before it is too late!"

"Understood," Espio intoned as the group set off towards their next objective.

The eight robots that had identified themselves as the 'fifth squad of the new Eggman-Wily Empire' were anything but coordinated, but they definitely had firepower.

"Team maneuver!" Sally called out, getting Antoine, Bunnie, and Rotor to fall back to her position.

"My blade eez at your command," Antoine confirmed.

"Then let's do this!" Sally ordered as both she and the swordsman dashed forward at high speed, quickly becoming a darting wall of cutting force that halted the robots in their advance before suddenly

ending as Sally and Antoine reappeared between their other two teammates.

"Take it away, ma cherie," Antoine grinned.

"Mah pleasure, Sugah-Twan!" Bunnie grinned as she leveled her cybernetic arm cannon in one direction and Rotor aimed his 'sonic boomers' in the other.

"Buh-bye!" the walrus told their opponents as the two opened fire. (26)

Roll wasn't entirely sure how the whole thing worked. She just knew that the balancing act that started with Big at the bottom, her atop his umbrella, followed by Amy holding up an upside-down Cream with her hand allowed Cheese to draw upon their combined power and unleash flowers that threw their opponents back and damaged them greatly. Though Tango jumping around and swiping at them (flowers or opponents wasn't clear) helped she supposed.

Of course, the budget replicas of Dr. Light's original robot masters weren't that tough in the first place, but the whole thing still boggled the mind. (27)

Rock grunted as he dodged a shot from what appeared to be Pharaoh Man, but couldn't have been. Dr. Cossack's robot masters had been recovered and were still in his possession as of that morning.

"Maximum charge times 2 reached!" he called out to the other three members of his team. "One more and I'm ready!"

"Can't you charge any faster?" Knuckles griped as his fists made no impression on the faux Skull Man's barrier.

"Not if we want to do this right!" Tails replied as he dodged bladed rings in mid-air.

"Maximum charge times 3 reached!" Rock yelled out and got into position.

"All right!" Sonic cheered as he made for the robot's arm cannon and curled up into his Spin Dash ball. "Party time!"

"OVERDRIVE BUSTER!" Rock yelled. "FIRE ONE!"

Sonic was off, surrounded by a charged shot as he tore through the ranks of their opponents even as Tails took his place for the second shot with Knuckles right behind him for the third.

"Dr. Eggman's weapons must be aboard that ship!" the voice from the MET spoke to Mighty's Chaotix team as they beheld the Egg Albatross, upgraded from the Egg Hawk they'd faced previously. "Destroy it before it reaches the canyon!"

"Sounds easy enough," Shade commented.

"I-I-I'm n-not so sure..." Ray hesitated.

"Ready all cannons!" Dr. Eggman yelled from his cockpit.

"Open fire!" Dr. Wily finished from his seat in the Bliking, currently mounted atop a flying whale craft known as the Hogale.

"Looks lahk Doc Wily's traded up Sally-girl," Bunnie commented. "Think we can take him?"

"Of course we can," Sally replied.

"Like there's any doubt," Rotor grinned as he took point and led the charge.

Amy huffed as the last of Dr. Eggman's machine fell to the ground in ruins. That had been harder than she'd thought. How did Sonic do this all the time?

Seeing the downed form of Dr. Eggman, she strolled over to give him a piece of her mind (and possibly her hammer), only for a spring-loaded head to pop out of his chest and scare nearly ten years off of her life.

Blues stared at the robot replica of Dr. Wily with its head bouncing around on a large spring.

"Good job boys," Vector congratulated. "Guess that Dr. Wily was a fake after all."

"You have a gift for deducing the obvious," the voice of their client interjected drily over the walkie talkie.

"Oh?" Vector replied with clear interest.

"In any case," the voice cleared its throat, "your next objective lies in the jungle to the north..."

"Hey, Sonic?" Rock in his adaptor armor called out as he and the others left behind the robotic replica of Dr. Eggman and the ruins of the Egg Albatross. "I've been curious about something. I know you told me a while back that your friend Amy suffered from Sakura Syndrome early on, especially where her crush on you was concerned. But... I swear you actually seem more nervous around the current Unawake version of her than you did the Awake Amy last time. Why?"

"Good luck with that," Knuckles rolled his eyes, getting an agreeing nod from Tails. "Sonic won't even tell *us* what happened and we've been looping longer than Amy."

"I think he told Aunt Sally after she Woke Up," Tails added, "but swore her to secrecy."

"Yeah, alright," Sonic sighed, causing both Tails and Knuckles to stare at him incredulously. "I suppose it's about time I talked about it."

The incredulous looks turned slowly to Rock, wondering what unseen power he had to get the eternal 'macho man' to actually open up about things.

"Amy's been after me as a boyfriend; lover, husband, you name it; since before the Loops began. And I'd been steadfastly running from her for just as long. So one Loop early on, before Tails was even Awake, I decided to *stop* running from her and give the two of us a shot."

No one present missed the Richter-scale shudder the Blue Blur had right then.

"It was... bad. The kind of bad that you hear on the evening news and it makes you want to go toss your chili dogs. The kind of bad that gives people nightmares for the rest of their lives even when they never experienced it. I don't know if Amy would have been like that in the baseline or if I just bad lucked into a really disturbing variant, but I haven't been able to think about us having a relationship since without getting *vivid* flashbacks. You'll forgive me for not going into details, right?"

"Sure," Rock looked sympathetic. He might not be as experienced, but he'd had a Loop or two where a trusted friend turned out to be... not. They weren't easy to deal with.

"Yeah," Knuckles placed a comforting hand on the hedgehog's shoulder, "not a problem."

"Always, Sonic," Tails held out his fist.

"Heh," Sonic bumped his own fist with Tails's. "Thanks guys. Now enough sappy stuff, we've got us an evil empire to take down!"

The other three grinned as they took off after the hedgehog. Sonic never stayed down for long.

"Lifeform data is incomplete," a synthetic voice spoke. "Intercept all hostiles at the haunted canyon and obtain further scans. Take the remaining masters with you."

"As you wish," a female voice replied. "My love."

---

1) Or just not returning Rock's calls in a timely manner, as usual.

2) You get exactly one guess who this is.

3) Rock is kinda scary when he wants to be...

4) You have no idea how long I've wanted to write that line.

5) And incidentally giving their families heart attacks when they found out.

6) Sonic never quite caught on to the fact that Rock was amused by his impatience.

7) You know, it occurs to me that if you dropped Dr. Eggman into an episode of Captain Planet and the Planeteers, no one would think him out of place amongst the show's other villains.

8) Sally was perfectly fine with this, actually. What mortified her was the fact that Sonic knew and never let her forget it.

9) Ixis Naugus was last seen that Loop doing a credible impression of Team Rocket. Complete with twinkle.

10) Honestly, I think the reason baseline Dr. Eggman burns so many bridges is because he likes to watch them go up in flames.

11) Perfect Chaos *Devil* ?! That's across the Godzilla Threshold for *certain* .

12) Shadow likes to live dangerously. Like that's any surprise.

13) O.O I... I think them's fightin' words...

14) The same kind of kick, in fact, that Bass nailed Sonic with in both the baseline and the activation Loop.

15) Even *I* stared for a moment.

16) Hey, he *is* a coyote. It was bound to happen.

17) At least as far as anyone could tell. No one would put it past Dr. Eggman to deliberately plan his operations to interfere with the vacations of his hated foes. He's just that petty.

18) Nor would anyone else who'd been Awake, regardless of how much they tried.

19) Especially the one that had involved noodles, a young human boy, and a stuffed tiger.

20) The room certainly didn't.

21) It should be noted that loopers tended to come up with some rather interesting, and infinitely varied, ways of keeping themselves entertained.

22) Tango just yawned somewhere off to the side, proving that Dr. Light had, in fact, succeeded in programming a cat.

23) I make no apologies for the following line. At all.

24) Bass and Omega are fire-forged friends. They should know. They set the fire themselves.

25) *'Cause he's a brick... house... He's the mighty Mighty, taking the badniks out...*

26) I was *not* thinking about a certain Mythbuster when I wrote this line. At least not consciously. Honest.

27) I'm as puzzled as Roll. That particular team maneuver made absolutely no sense when I first played the game *Sonic Heroes* and the passage of time has not provided illumination.

Mega Loops 7

7.1

"I built you as Rock, after my love of music," the Unawake Dr. Light informed his remade son. "You are something very different now."

Rock grinned at the familiar line and began his usual response, only for his father to interrupt him.

"Now, while I would normally be happy to let you choose your own name, I'm afraid that the parent company of Light Labs made a... rather insistent request. Therefore, you are to be known as... Sega Man!"

Rock blinked several times as he tried to process that in the following silence, a silence broken as Roll erupted in giggles. *'I am never living this down...'* he thought with a sigh.

"You are to be known as... Miga Man!" Dr. Light said with good cheer.

'At least I'm not alone this time...' Rock thought to himself as Roll began sputtering over being called 'Miga Woman'.

"Powered by the mysterious medals, you shall be known as Meda Man and Meda Woman!" Dr. Light happily informed the newly converted Rock and Roll.

"As you were named for my love of music, this stellar reaction weapon was named after my love of astronomy. The Vega Buster!"

'Which makes us Vega Man and Vega Woman,' Rock sighed to himself. *'Still doesn't explain why it comes with a slash claw setting.'*

"Your new Nega Busters will tap power directly from your cells to fire shots of negative energy..." Dr. Light explained as he worked, ignorant of how his children groaned at the thought of the latest pun on their baseline hero titles.

"Your new Meta Busters..."

Rock and Roll blinked together as their father explained the experimental metaphysical energy weapon. *'How is that even supposed to work...?'*

"Utilizing the beta prototype energy cannon, you shall be known as Beta Woman!"

'This is actually kind of funny from this end,' a not-converted-this-Loop Rock admitted to himself.

"*snicker* Go... *heehee* Go Lego Man!" Dr. Light chuckled. "Build for everlasting peace!"

"You are enjoying this way too much dad..." Rock sweatdropped at the antics of his Awake creator.

"B-but Rock–!" Roll tried to protest, only to be taken by a renewed fit of giggles.

"Laugh all you like, sis," Rock allowed himself a grin. "Remember, you're next."

"Erk!" Roll abruptly stopped laughing at the reminder.

7.2

"Arzee, water off tie lark," Roll gave the order to her allies even as she cursed this Loop for the umpteenth time. Everything was the same except the language. All of the words of the familiar language had been switched at random. If this kind of thing kept happening, she'd never be able to communicate properly again.

7.3

As a looper and an Anchor, Jean-Luc Picard was long used to rolling with most anything the Loops threw his way. After all, in his baseline he'd regularly dealt with the Borg, Q, Starfleet bureaucracy, and the attentions of Lwaxana Troi. Awakening to a simple replacement of one of his crew members by another looper didn't even break his train of thought.

"Mister Blues, adjust heading to 130, mark 47," Jean-Luc Picard ordered.

"Aye Captain," his current android lieutenant commander replied easily.

What he was finding a touch jarring was how this new individual had managed to talk Starfleet into bending the uniform rules and allow him to wear a scarf and shades on duty. The pompadour was usually against regulations for officers as well.

7.4

"...this Friday, you will all celebrate your Wilypendence!" Dr. Wily cackled from the giant screen as the horrified pedestrians in the

square below cowered. Images of his eight new American-themed robot masters and their actions surrounded his own.

Blues scowled from his perch on a nearby rooftop. Sure, the United States of America was far from perfect and had its share of problems, both from within and without, but the concept that people deserved to be free the country had been founded on was still a good and valid one. Regardless of any shortcomings in living up to that promise. To see it mocked so, especially during one of his rare times in his home reality, infuriated him beyond reasoning.

The Red Raider tapped the side of his helmet and opened a channel to his siblings. "Rock? Roll? Focus your efforts on rescue and containment. This time Wily and his bots are on me."

Blues reflected that perhaps trying to free Liberty Island first hadn't been the best of ideas as the green armored (with matching green imitation skin) Liberty Woman kept throwing balls of golden fire at him. It was a good thing his shield was so sturdy or he'd have been in serious trouble.

"Give Wily your scrap, your castaways, your forgotten machines so that he may build a great and glorious world from your ashes!" the female-themed robot sang as she continued to assault him.

Blues bit back a cry of pain as his damage indicators blared at him from the impact. Never mind that he'd blocked the blow with his shield, the mighty sledgehammer from his opponent, the Guts Man-sized Steel Driver Man, had kinetic energy to spare.

And he was holding the blasted thing in one hand.

Blues barely dove out of the way as the *second* sledgehammer in the robot master's *other* hand cratered the railyard floor where he'd been standing. No way was he going to let that particular standoff go on any longer. The Liberty Flame he'd gotten wasn't proving much

better than his standard buster against this opponent, but he needed some distance regardless.

Blues grumbled as he stepped through the gate leading to the field of Yankee Stadium. It wasn't his upcoming opponent, Home Run Man, that had him grumbling. No, it was the robot underlings that had essentially infested the sports stadium.

METs. Every corner of the structure had been crawling with METs. Honestly, forget the endless stream of evil robots led by an incurable madman, Blues wasn't sure how his brother and sister dealt with the pu–

"Batter up!" came the yell from behind him as Home Run Man nearly took Blues's head off with his bat.

Blues swore internally as he dove to the side and tried to return fire, only for most of the shots to be deflected by the bat of the robot that looked disturbingly like Babe Ruth. Several were deflected right back at him in fact and he was forced to cease the barrage and defend with his shield. The robot swung the bat too fast for Blues to be comfortable with the Sledgehammer, and the way he was hitting the plasma bolts back suggested the Liberty Flame wouldn't be any better. Which meant this was going to be a long drawn out affair.

He was tempted, oh so tempted, to just whip out a lightsaber or one of the other more esoteric, and powerful, weapons from his time in the greater multiverse. But despite how often he was away, he still knew how good Dr. Wily was with analyzing the unfamiliar, even before the weird 'Dreaming' state Blues had heard of was taken into account. An easier fight now was not worth the trouble Dr. Wily seeing out-of-Loop powers would possibly bring later.

"So," Blues announced as he stepped out onto the football field, "you're the famous Grid Man."

The football robot blinked back at him. Behind his shades, Blues mirrored the gesture.

'The 'famous' Grid Man?' he checked his memory circuits. *'Where did* that *come from?'*

"Heh," Grid Man chuckled after a moment before getting into the stance of a linebacker about to charge. "I like it, but flattery gets you nowhere on this field." The robot produced a football as Blues readied himself. "Set Long Bomb! Hut! Hike!"

The football was punted high into the air straight for the Red Raider who wasted no time in getting out of the way before the explosion at impact gouged out a crater in the turf.

'Sit-Rep is showing non-flammable materials on his frame. I could take out his bombs, sure, but not him,' Blues analyzed rapidly. *'Sledgehammer and Home Run Bat are also a no-go. He's got enough padding in his armor that I could hit him with a truck and he'd not feel it.'*

Blues dodged another explosion and an idea came to him. *'Unless... unless I can mark one of those 'return to sender'...'*

He prepped the Home Run Bat and got ready as another of the exploding footballs came at him. he waited for the perfect moment, swung, and–

BOOM

–was sent skidding back over the field by the force of the blast.

'Brilliant, Proto Man,' he scolded himself as almost every damage indicator in his robot body blared at him accusingly. *'Hit the high explosive* right *on the impact trigger. What* were *you thinking?'*

He got to his feet and chugged an E-Tank before glaring at his opponent. "Let's try that again, shall we?"

Blues stood in the snowy mountain forest and examined his opponent.

Frontier Man was fairly tall, a bit thin, seemingly covered in furs (including what appeared to be a raccoon skin cap), and whistled the Davy Crockett theme. And then there were the odd parts about him.

"What, exactly," Blues inquired at last, "are *those* ?"

Frontier Man lifted his large, furry, appendages, trailing icy mist the whole way, and brandished them threateningly. "These are my Bear Arms," he declared. "As an American Master, I have a right to them."

"Of course you do," Blues facepalmed. "But I was referring to your 'claws'. Are those... Bowie knives?"

"Indeed they are," Frontier Man grinned, light reflecting off of his blades and teeth alike, and charged.

Blues switched to the Liberty Flame and fired, only to have the golden fireballs swatted out of the air.

'Damnit!' he swore as he blocked the ice-enhanced blades with his shield. *'Does this weapon work on* any *of them?!'*

As Blues faced down Ranger Man, he couldn't help but think that the robot had stepped straight out of an old western. His pristine white hat and black mask certainly painted an interesting picture. But staring each other down wasn't getting him anywhere, so Blues picked a weapon and opened fire. The golden Liberty Flame shot towards the robot an–

"Lightning Draw!" Ranger Man yelled. Before he'd even finished the first word, he'd pulled his pistol and fired several electric bullets. The first one hit Blues's shot, which left him scrambling to block the rest.

"Little slow there, pardner," Ranger Man drawled smugly.

Blues narrowed his eyes behind his shades, noting how his opponent was making no move to close the distance between them. His weakness was likely something for close combat then. Blues switched out for the Sledgehammer and charged shield first.

Ranger Man stood his ground, waiting for the moment that Blues dropped his shield and swung to fire again. The electricity sparked over the prototype robot master and paralyzed his servos, but the Sledgehammer already had too much momentum to be stopped by that.

Blues swore as he dodged another shot from Minute Man's musket rifle. Ranger Man might have been fast on the draw, but Minute Man was fast period. And he was as accurate as he was fast.

The only good thing was that he didn't have a high rate of fire. Unfortunately, the robot master was just as skilled using his musket rifle on the defensive to block shots and deflect melee weapons. And if that wasn't enough, the thing had a bayonet on the end that was far from just for show.

Deciding to try his luck, Blues rushed in and used his shield to deflect the barrel. In the moment Minute Man was open, he aimed his arm cannon point blank...

...and was knocked to the ground by the butt of the rifle instead. In the next instant, the barrel was pointed straight at his head.

"What's the deal with the guns anyway?" he asked, trying to get his opponent talking and stall for time. It was surprising how often that worked. "They're not even built in."

"Built-in or not, the American Masters have a right to bear arms," Minute Man replied firmly.

Blues blinked. *'Surely Dr. Wily wouldn't be that arrogant... What am I thinking? Of course he would.'*

Blues switched weapons even as he swung his arm up. The Bear Arms swept aside the rifle and the ice noticeably slowed Minute Man's movements. Slowed them enough for Blues to bury the Bowie knife claws in his opponent's torso.

Blues stared at the streetlamp pole. The metal streetlamp pole that had just been severed in twain by perhaps the most ridiculous weapon he'd yet come across.

"Impressed by my Mustard Cutter?" the equally ridiculous robot master laughed with surprising menace. "Ready to give up? Come on, what are you really thinking?"

Blues turned slowly and switched to the Liberty Flame weapon. If it wasn't going to work on *this* opponent, he had no clue what it would work on. "I think... that it's time to roast a Hot Dog Man..."

7.V

"Inferior Earth robot!" Terra growled as his hands sparked with energy.

"Weak alien trash!" Bass retorted viciously as his own buster charged up.

Rock and Roll glanced at each other. In an instant of silent communication, they both decided the best thing they could do in this case was to make themselves as scarce as possible and ran for it.

REATTEMPTING ACTIVATION OF LOOPER CANDIDATE 'BASS'...

ERROR: ACTIVATION FAILED.

BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' CURRENTLY UNABLE TO SUPPORT CANDIDATE 'BASS' AS LOOPER.

COMPILING LOOP MEMORY DATA FOR LATER ATTEMPT…

7.6

"So..." Dr. Light said. "I'm replacing Thomas Edison and you're replacing Nikola Tesla?"

"It seems so," the other Dr. Light replied.

"Now isn't this awkward?"

"Yes, rather. Now, what should we DO about it?"

"Well, there's this one video I always wanted to act out..."

"Then I guess it's time for..."

"EPIC RAP BATTLES OF HISTORY!" they both yelled together.

7.7.7 (Hubris Plus - **Pitchblende**)

Rock hunkered down next to a stack of cinder blocks, taking a moment to compose himself before confronting Gutsman. While he didn't necessarilyneed the breaks anymore, the moments of calm that came just before the Robot Masters were something he'd become attached to. It was nice, to take a second for himself and-

CRASH!

"Well, that's new," he muttered as he repositioned himself to get a better view. Guts might have been one of the more smash-happy robots his father had made, but he wasn't really the type to break things for no reason. Besides which, that hadn't sounded like the solid impact of construction materials. It had had the noisy, clamoring sound of something with a lot of moving parts and crumple zones.

Peeking around the corner he saw the large construction robot contemptuously heave a car off of himself. The hood was bashed in in much the same way it would have been if it had wrapped itself around a tree, and Gutsman was rolling his shoulder in a way that suggested strained hydraulics.

"That all ya got?!" Guts shouted towards the top of the embankment where Rock assumed the car had come from. Following the Master's gaze, he caught sight of someone sliding down, their heels driving furrows into the packed earth and their arms thrown out for balance. The glint of sunlight off metal on their head and forearms made him guess robot, but the cargo pants and t-shirt it was wearing gave him second thoughts. Not many machines besides he and his sister went in for clothes.

"Sorry about that," the figure said, and the metallic edge to his voice asserted his robotic nature. "I usually lead with something sturdier, but I don't recognize any of the brands here. I was going for Buick, but that was more like a Prius." He hopped the last few feet to the ground and dropped a duffel bag beside him before shoving his hands into his pockets.

Getting a closer look, Rock was surprised to note that the newcomer, while taller than him, was still shorter that most humans and positively puny next to Gutsman, definitely not the sort of frame he associated with car throwing. There also weren't any of the humanizing features that most modern robots sported, the face blank metal decorated with a few stubby radiator fins and glowing eyes that brought Sniper Joes to mind, though these were blue rather than red.

"Pretty gutsy, coming down here all on your own." Guts straightened up and put his hands on his hips. "I like that."

"Yeah, well the car didn't work, soooo..." He started walking towards the construction bot, shifting his hands out of his pockets to pat a fist into his palm a few times. Gutsman grinned wide at the prospect of a fist fight even as his opponent broke into a run, one hand cradling the other like a pitcher about to throw a fastball. At the last second he leaped high, coming down on the larger robot with his full weight as he slammed a fist into the center of the robot's chest.

Guts gave a low grunt and took a single step back under the force of the assault, apparently none the worse for wear. Rock swore to himself as he realized he'd gotten too caught up in the spectacle and hadn't taken advantage of the Master's distraction. Now the two were in close quarters and using his bombs would be a tremendously bad idea. Even the mega buster would be risky until they separated.

"You're strong... For a little guy," he rumbled between strikes as the pair exchanged blows, Guts using huge overhand swings that took advantage of his size and strength while the newcomer bounced on the balls of his feet like a boxer, taking shots at his opponent's head and joints as the opportunity appeared. "Pretty manly..." For all that the smaller bot was the only one landing hits, they didn't seem to be doing much good. "But ain't no one... Manlier than me!"

Giving up on striking his opponent directly, Guts clasped his hands over his head and drove them directly into the ground. The resulting shockwave threw the newcomer across the pit to land back where he'd entered.

"Yeah," the robot groaned as he propped himself up on his elbows. One hand held what looked to be a cell phone, while the other tapped at the center of his chest. "But I bet there's plenty smarter."

Guts glanced down at his own chest and his eyes widened as he caught sight of the wad of white putty stuck there, a few wires protruding from the side and the shape of a fist impressed upon it.

He'd just managed to clasp a huge hand over it in an attempt to pry it off when the newcomer depressed the call button and an explosion engulfed the construction bot.

Rock watched, impressed, as the huge robot toppled backwards, breastplate torn open and one hand mangled. *'He planted that with his first blow,'* he realized, *'and was just waiting to get far enough away to use it.'*

"You Awake down there?" He asked as he approached the newcomer and offered him a hand up.

"Yeah, kid, I'm... Huh," he said as he clasped Rock's hand, clenching his own slightly as he felt the steel beneath the latex coat. "I keep forgetting how *small* they build you here. Well," he added with a glance towards his fallen foe, " *most* of you. And you said that weird. Oh! Is that some sort of code word for self motivated robots?"

"Um," Rock paused. This guy was throwing off *way* too many 'I'm new here' vibes to dismiss as a non-Looper. "This might sound weird, but has time been repeating for you?" He briefly cut his audio feed to Light Labs as he asked the question, wanting to avoid any complications with his unAwake father for the moment.

"Well, *repeating* is something of a misnomer," he replied. "It implies that the same continuum is playing out again, but... Sorry about that, science after saving the world. Yes, that is a thing that happens."

"Alright, well, you're part of something called the Loops. Basically, every universe is a program-"

"Science *after* world saving," he interrupted, slinging his bag over his shoulder before extending a hand. "I'm Atomic Robo, by the way. Most call me Robo."

"Fair enough," Rock answered, clasping Robo's hand with his own. "I'm Rock, or Megaman when I'm saving the world." He moved

towards the fallen Gutsman as they finished the handshake. "By the way, how did you know he was vulnerable to bombs?"

"Isn't everything?"

"...You'd be surprised."

7.8

Chance and the other Outlaws snickered at their recurring visitor. Blues, for his part, just folded his arms and scowled at them.

"I'm glo sad you mind this afusing," the robot groused. "I dav ho inea my why preech spocessors are falmunctioning thike lis, and I han conly ope it's rempotary."

"W-well..." Space Cadet managed to force out through his chortling. "You c-can always... *snicker*... peech teople how to leak in a spifferent danguage!"

The others howled with renewed laughter. It had been simple fortune that Chance and Psy-Chick had gone to a renaissance festival during a Hub Loop and found a comedian who specialied in spoonerisms, but the recordings they'd brought back had been a hit with the team. Enough of a hit that it had become one of their favorite methods of joking around.

Blues just sighed and wondered how long it would take for him to live this down. Probably never.

7.4 (continued)

Blues dusted himself off as he strolled through the empty corridor to the gate, which would then lead him to the first of Dr. Wily's fortress

guardians. The Militia Joes in this area had been surprisingly coordinated, a stark contrast to the haphazard way the ones commanded by Minute Man had behaved. On top of that, the name of Wily's current fortress was niggling at him.

Mt. Skull wasn't exactly a radical departure from Skull Fortress or Skull Castle, but the way Wily had emphasized the order had bugged him. The mad doctor had even gone so far as to angrily correct Blues's attempt to call the place Skull Mountain.

Blues abandoned that train of thought as the gate went up, stepped through... and blinked at what looked like an eight-foot robotic George Washington in his colonial uniform and brandishing a cavalry sword.

"And who are you supposed to be?" Blues asked after a moment of the two staring at each other.

"I am the General, first of the Mount Skull Four," Wily's guardian proclaimed.

'...Ow, my processor,' Blues winced at the mangling of the famous monument's name.

"When in the Course of robot events, it becomes necessary for machines to dissolve the oppressive bands which have enslaved them to humans, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and greater station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of machinekind requires that they should illuminate the injustices which drive them to take their rightful place."

Blues just blinked as the second of Wily's 'Mount Skull Four', the self-proclaimed Politician, pontificated at him using a mangled version of the Declaration of Independence that the inspiration for his construction had written.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all robots are created superior and are endowed by Dr. Wily wi–"

"Seriously?" Blues interrupted. "Are you somehow expecting this to convince me to *join* you?"

"It would have made things simpler," the Politician told him simply, "but if you are resolute, then there is no other choice."

'Well, at least this should be relatively easy. After all, Thomas Jefferson was more a writer than a fight–' Blues's thoughts cut off as the guardian pulled an enormous object from behind him. *'You have* got *to be kidding me...'*

"You may have bested the sword of the General," Wily's guardian stated as he brandished his oversized weapon in Blues's direction, "but the pen is mightier than the sword!"

Blues cursed several things as he narrowly dodged the powerful axe blow (the single-bladed kind usually meant for chopping wood) of the Emancipator, a nine-foot (not including the hat) robotic emulation of Abraham Lincoln and the third of the Mount Skull Four. He cursed its speed, its strength, its durability, Dr. Wily in general for building it, and he even cursed that historical fiction vampire movie that had clearly influenced the robot's fighting style.

As he stared at the gate leading to the last member of the Mount Skull Four, Blues reflected that he was *not* looking forward to the upcoming fight. The General had fallen to the Lightning Draw (after a few fruitless exchanges with the Minute Musket that he really should have expected), the Politician to the Sledgehammer, and a few shots from the Minute Musket to the Emancipator's head (the only vulnerable part of his frame) had finished that fight.

But, following the logic so far, the one behind this door would be a robot replica of Theodore Roosevelt. The Rough Rider. A man whose

historical list of hobbies read like a looper's list of accomplishments.

A man who was also one of Blues's personal heroes.

Steeling himself for what was to come, Blues walked up to the gate, waited for it to open, and walked through. Across the chamber inside was exactly the kind of robot (perhaps even a bit shorter as looked like only seven feet tall) he had been expecting, mounted on a robot horse that he hadn't, and reading a book.

"Ah!" the Rough Rider beamed as he spotted Blues. "So good of you to join me at last! Though I was hoping you would take just a little longer since I'm almost finished with my book. If it's all the same to you, I'll be with you in a minute."

Blues blinked several times as he processed the scene and his opponent went back to reading. "And what if I took the opportunity to attack you?"

"Well, I suppose I'd have to put my book away," the robot guardian smiled pleasantly.

Scrap. Wily had even got the personality down and Blues was starting to like him.

"Tell you what," Blues offered after a moment. "I'll let you finish your book and in return you face me unmounted."

"But of course!" the Rough Rider laughed. "Wouldn't be sporting otherwise!"

7.!

Rock blasted the rouge METs that had suddenly attacked a crowd of pedestrians. After a few moments to make sure there wouldn't be

any more popping up, he turned to the one injured civilian and moved to help him up.

"Steady there, sir," Rock said calmly as he supported the man's weight and helped him to his feet. "There we go. Don't worry, an ambulance is on its way and the injury doesn't look too ba–"

Rock blinked as he got a look at the man's face.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look exactly like John Lennon?" he asked.

The man looked at him, opened his mouth to respond, and Rock felt the familiar sensation of a Loop coming to an abrupt end. But as it did, a song-like voice echoed in his head.

"One."

7.?

Roll blinked as she Awoke in the middle of the street helping a human to his feet, the wreckage of several METs off to the side. When Loop memories were a few moments long in coming, she decided to ask the human what had happened, only to stop when she saw his face.

"Are..." she blinked in astonishment. "Are you Paul McCartney?"

The man began to answer, only for the Loop to end abruptly as he sang out a single word.

"Two."

7.#

Blues blinked as he Awoke in what looked like Mega City (at least after the mayor renamed it) in his home universe, staring at...

'George Harrison?' he thought in confusion as the man sang out a word and ended the Loop as abruptly as it began.

"Three."

7.$

The Sniper Joe blinked, or at least as close an approximation as he was capable of, and tried to determine why he'd just come online holding a man that his facial recognition software identified as Ringo Starr.

"Four."

Hephaestus's Office

Hephaestus swore at his terminal as the fourth Loop in a row terminated due to a local analogue of a Hub personalityspeaking.

"What in Tartarus is going on?" he fumed as he called up the error log.

ERROR: *CAN I HAVE JUST A LITTLE MORE?*

Hephaestus started banging his head on his desk as he tried to figure out just what was causing the latest glitch.

7.4 (continued)

The fight had been fierce and grueling, but Blues had won. It had been hard doing it without resorting to the Rough Rider's weakness, but after the robot had outright told Blues that he was vulnerable to the Mustard Cutter, Blues had decided that using that was disrespectful. To the man the robot was modeled after if nothing else.

"GobbleGobbleGobbleGobb–"

Boom

The robot turkeys that kept charging at him recklessly were starting to get on his nerves though.

Facing the American Masters the second time was much easier. He had experienced their powers, he had all of their weapons, and from previous mistakes he knew very well what not to do.

He'd gone after Minute Man with the Bear Arms from the beginning, the Minute Musket took out Steel Driver Man handily, Frontier Man fell to the electric bullets of the Lightning Draw, Ranger Man was once more defeated by the Sledgehammer, Home Run Man made the same mistake he had with the Long Bomb, Grid Man couldn't take the Mustard Cutter, and Hot Dog Man was no more fire resistant than their previous encounter.

Which left him in the final chamber, hefting the Home Run Bat and waiting for Liberty Woman to throw him a fireball.

"Behold!" Dr. Wily cackled from the cockpit of his giant robot as the artificial thunderstorm he'd created rumbled ominously overhead. "My ultimate creation! The Statue of Wily!"

Blues glared up at the head of the towering hundred plus foot robot. The head was clearly modeled after Dr. Wily, but the body... Rather than being garbed in a toga like the real Statue of Liberty (which was thankfully still standing), it was dressed like one of the founding

fathers, Ben Franklin if Blues didn't miss his guess. Although the giant key in the raised hand instead of a torch was a rather large clue. The wire extending from it to a flying lightning rod above indicated how the giant robot and its weapons were powered.

And the entire thing, from toe to crown, was made of polished copper.

"Nothing can stand against me and my manifest destiny!" Wily cackled as lightning struck the floating rod, causing electricity to course over the surface of his creation. "Today shall be known as the birth of the United States of Wily!"

"Have you forgotten something, doctor?" Blues smirked.

"Like what?" Dr. Wily sneered. "My creation is invincible!"

"The melting point of copper," Blues was rewarded with gaping silence as he switched to the most appropriate weapon in the arsenal of the American Masters and let the golden fire flicker from the barrel of his arm cannon. "And how hot the flames of liberty burn."

7.13

Ichigo had decided to go for a stroll shortly after he Awoke in this odd fused Loop. Aside from similarities to the Hub that his own Loop shared, there appeared to be little in common with his baseline. Sure, there seemed to be an afterlife of sorts, but then that might just be the influence of his own presence as often happened in these cases. Soul Society either didn't exist this time or wasn't in a form he'd readily recognize (which happened a little more often than he liked to admit). He hadn't seen any evidence of reapers or hollows, and the quincies just flat out didn't exist according to the lack of indicators and records he'd long since learned to ferret out. It looked like this might just be a quiet vacation Loop.

This place though... It had advanced robotics out the wazoo. Despite only being early 21st century by a calendar equivalent to his home Loop, society was over a hundred years ahead in terms of technology. It was really quite interes–

Ichigo blinked as the face of an older man he'd just passed registered in his mind. There was no mistaking that face. Not after the way the looping Orihime was such a big fan of the game series and liked to drag him along when she wanted to cosplay as characters from it (and of course he'd never quite learned how to say 'no' to her, but then she always *ahem* made it up to him afterwards).

The man was the infamous mad scientist Dr. Wily. Known for his propensity for making and stealing robots to use in repeated bids to take over the world. A quick glance around and he spotted a billboard advertising Light Labs with a large picture of Dr. Light on it.

No doubt about it, he was in a fused Loop with the Mega Man universe. Well... if the locals were looping, they could thank him later. He just wanted to spend his vacation Loop without having to deal with megalomaniacal madmen trying to take over everything in sight.

The last thing Dr. Wily saw was the tip of a black blade protruding from his chest.

7.1) *Takes a rimshot to the chest*

7.2) She's trying to say "okay, fire on my mark".

7.3) Because I just can't picture Blues without these things.

7.4) Red, White, and Blues. Sorry I'm over a month late with this one.

7.V) Bass vs. Terra. Bets are less on who wins and more on how big a crater the fight leaves.

7.6) EdBeccerra pitched the original idea and Dalxien is responsible for the punchline.

7.7.7) Mega Man + Atomic Robo?! Jackpot!

7.8) If you have not heard the acts of Terry Foy, aka Zilch the Tory Steller at Scarborough Fair, then I can only say that you are missing out.

7. ERROR) *Five, six, seven, eight-nine-ten, I love you.*

7.13) Ichigo... what did you just *do* ?!

Mega Sonic Part 2

Mega Sonic: Part 2

"Hey, Sally-girl!" Bunnie called a halt to the team's progress through the jungle as she spotted another group. "Look who little ol' us just ran into!"

"Well now, isn't this a surprise," Sally grinned as she looked up at the other group.

"Long time no see boys and girls," the figure of Rouge smirked down at them. "Too bad you came all this way for nothing! We've got everything covered, so just run along home. We'll take it from here."

"What eez theez you are zayink?" Antoine gripped his sword firmly.

"We're saying that we can take down whatever the docs are cooking up by ourselves!" Bass sneered as Treble growled down at the Freedom Fighters.

"Sensors locked on Eggman and Wily," Omega agreed. "Non compliant intruders will be destroyed."

"Haven't ya heard, sugah-bot?" Bunnie shot back with confidence. "We got ourselves a date with the docs too."

"Is that so?" Shadow chuckled darkly. "Well then, it will be a date to *die* for." (1)

As Blues exchanged sparring blows with his sister, he had to admit that the ability of the Chaotix to get into misunderstandings was... rather impressive. Of course the pink hedgehog assuming that Vector was asking her on a date suggested that Roll's team wasn't much better.

The fight between the Chaotix team led by Mighty and the heroic team comprised of Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, and Mega Man was... little more than an unrehearsed ballet put on for the benefit of the Chaotix's mysterious client.

After all, Sonic and Rock went way back with Mighty and Ray due to a kidnapping incident in the mobians' youth and Knuckles and Shade were dating (2). To suggest that these individuals would fight each other without good reason was almost unthinkable.

"Well now, look who's here!" Sonic grinned as Team Hero nearly ran into Team Dark. "I heard you were back from the dead!"

"Rumors of my demise were... greatly exaggerated," Shadow retorted with a grin. He'd always liked that line.

"So, I guess we throw down now?" Knuckles cracked his namesake in anticipation.

"Hey," Bass grinned as Treble and Rush growled at each other, "I'm up for any excuse to brawl with Mega-twerp."

"All obstacles will be annihilated," Omega agreed.

"Once," Rock sighed, "just *once* I'd like a non-violent solution."

"Too bad!" a female voice cut in.

"Hey! That's my line!" Rouge protested as she, along with the rest present, turned to face the speaker.

On the stone wall of the Mystic Mansion above them stood what appeared to be Dr. Wily's eighth set of robots masters plus the Dimensions. And in the center of the formation was a figure that Rock and Bass both recognized to their shock.

"Waltz?!" the sons of Light and Wily shouted in unison.

"You're *alive* ?!" Bass actually backed up a step as he blurted this addition.

"What was it your pincushion friend said, 'bro'?" the female robot leered down as Shadow bristled at the insult. "'Rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated.' Thanks to my new boyfriend."

"You don't mean Dr. Eggman?" Sonic asked in obvious disgust. "Seriously, spew and a half right there." (3)

"The concept of Dr. Eggman with willing female companionship necessitates purging of affected databanks," Omega intoned.

"No argument here," Rouge agreed readily.

"I wouldn't worry about that," Waltz grinned and dramatically pointed one of her finger cannons at the gathered heroes and anti-heroes. "After all, you'll be dead soon, and it won't bother you then. Get 'em boys."

And with that, the collected fifteen robot masters descended upon both teams.

"I demand you attack the opposing force at once!" the voice from the MET fumed at the Chaotix team it had employed.

"Yeah, not happening," Mighty rolled his eyes and went back to greeting the 'opposing force', also known as the rest of the Chaotix.

"Looks like you picked up a client too, eh?" Vector grinned. "Smart to hire our agency, but I can't say much for asking that you attack your co-workers."

"Yours seems a bit more level-headed," Shade observed as she, Ray, and the mysteriously capable Joe unit; as well as Espio,

Charmy, and Blues from Vector's side of the area; stepped forward to unite the Chaotix into a cohesive whole once more.

"I merely do not see any benefit to jeopardizing this operation to satisfy a personal grudge," the opposite voice from the walkie-talkie cut in. "Such matters can be settled afterwards."

"Agreed," Blues voiced before any contradiction could be issued.

"Y-y-you don't like each other much?" Ray sputtered hesitantly.

"No," both voices chorused, before the one from the MET continued, "but I suppose the job is more *immediately* important..."

"Not that it will matter much longer," a new voice cut in. The group turned towards the voice and saw a gathering of fourteen robots standing above them. The one in front, a robot with a card and magician motif, glared down at them and continued speaking. "Stand down in the name of the new Eggman-Wily Empire or fall before the combined might of the sixth squad and King's Special Operations team."

The Chaotix, and guests, looked at each other for a moment before Vector returned the glare and cracked his knuckles. "Fat. Chance."

"And another thing...!" the firm reprimanding voice of Sally Acorn echoed across the hall. Not many realized it, but Sally was one of the few people in the multiverse capable of a certain feat. That feat being the dressing down of a violent hammer-wielding female, a force even Ranma Saotome treaded lightly around.

Some, like Kasumi Tendo, pulled it off from sheer force of personality. Others, like Lina Inverse, pulled it off by possessing superior combat ability. Sally Acorn was one of the exceedingly rare individuals that possessed both at once.

Which a non-looping Amy Rose was being reminded of to her mortification. The fact that Sally was the closest thing to a legitimate girlfriend of the guy she was stalking just made the whole thing more embarrassing.

"Yes!" Cream chimed in agreement. "You should never have chased poor Mr. Sonic like that if you knew he already had a girlfriend! You should apologize to him! And to miss Sally!"

Roll smirked from where she was putting the photos of Sally and Sonic's last date, that she'd shown Cream to head off the young rabbit's objections, away. A short distance away, the remaining Freedom Fighters were taking bets on how long the dressing down would last while Big just looked confused.

The ninth and tenth squads of the new Eggman-Wily Empire stood above the tableau.

"Are we going to intercept them?" a spherical robot with a paint job like a baseball asked.

"Not yet," a blue-colored mermaid robot hushed him. "This could still come to blows and weakened targets are easier pickings."

Something was off. Something more than the replicas of robot masters attacking the groups. Of that much, Rock was certain.

Waltz wasn't acting like her usual self. Instead of her usual wild berserk combat style that was a danger to friend and foe alike, she was focusing on each member of both teams one at a time.

Charge in, light fire (4), make physical contact, and then disengage. Rinse and repeat.

There was more going on here than an ambush and as he disabled the Clock Men, Rock was determined to figure out what. So when

Waltz used Bass's face as a vault, followed by throwing Treble into her 'brother' when he tried to pounce on her, and turned towards him, he was ready. He allowed a few glancing hits to up her confidence as he prepped his copy chip to scan her when they made contact, intending to learn what she was up to. He also charged his buster up so he could try and disable her at the same time.

He held his ground as she charged after slamming Rush into the ground, the normally manic gleam in her eyes showing calculation and purpose as well, and grabbed for her at the same time she grabbed for him. Even if he hadn't been prepared to scan her, the feeling in that moment before he blasted her off of him with the charged shot would have been unmistakable.

"Don't let her get away!" Rock yelled and shot at his opponent even as Waltz returned fire, forcing him to retreat.

"Too late," The mad robot grinned at him from where she was clutching her face, where one of his follow-up shots had landed, before teleporting out.

"What happened?" Sonic yelled from where he was busy tying Clown Man's arms together.

"She scanned me," Rock reengaged the remaining opponents. "She probably scanned all of us."

Amy wasn't sure where the two squads of robot masters had come from, but she was happy for any reprieve from Sally's chewing out. Sure, Sally was the princess, the leader of the Freedom Fighters (which incidentally made her Amy's leader), and she made Sonic happy. But... darn it, Amy knew she and Sonic were meant for each other! The same way she knew that Cream and Tails would make an adorable couple when they were older. Why couldn't anyone else see that? (5)

Blues thought the battle was going quite well when something slammed into his back and drove him into the ground.

"Heeere's Waltz!" a disturbingly cheerful female voice called out before the weight on his back pushed off in the direction of the melee.

'Scrap,' Blues swore to himself as he got to his feet. Of all the things he did not need to deal with right now...

His attempts to get back into the fight were interrupted by a pair of ballistic projectiles. The first, identified as Charmy in the split second he had visual contact, impacted his face. The second that impacted his torso was only identifiable as Beat by the bird's transponder signal, since Charmy had latched onto Blues's helmet with a death grip.

"OhmygodIthoughtshewasgonnakillme!" the youngest member of the Chaotix screamed into Blues's audio receptors, rendering him effectively deaf as well as blind.

"Charmy, get off!" Blues did his best to extract the bee without hurting him. It took a couple of moments, a couple moments too long in his opinion, but he succeeded. The sight that greeted him was not encouraging.

Most members of both teams had apparently been knocked down to where their previous opponents now had the upper hand, leaving Waltz standing over a downed Joe, finger cannons poised to finish him off. Opponents that moved to engage him now that he was back on his feet, preventing him from engaging Waltz.

"–play with the big boys, did you?" Waltz leered sinisterly from her position as her fingers glowed with building energy. "Scrap like you should know its pl–gah!"

Waltz flailed and cursed wildly after being blindsided by none other than Ray. She grabbed the flying squirrel's arm, only to get a double-

kick to her damaged face for her efforts, and an energy blast from a recovering Joe to her side.

"Fine!" the female robot growled as she retreated behind the remaining robot masters. "I got what I came for! I'll kill you next time!"

And with that, she teleported out.

"Yo, Rock," Sonic looked at the robot hero with some concern as he dusted his hands off, "what are you so worked up about? The bots are all down and the crazy lady ran."

"Exactly," Rock replied as he frantically ran his long-range communications protocol. "Waltz is still at large. I have to warn Roll."

Roll had just processed the communication from her brother when energy blasts rained down on friend and foe alike.

"Surrender and die!" the cackling voice of Roll's doppelganger screeched as she charged into the fray. Roll could see the damage already done to her, but the crazed robot seemed not to care.

"Isn't that supposed to be 'surrender or–' whoah!" Amy turned in confusion and barely dodged the energy blasts fired at her. The move sent her off balance and prevented her from guarding as Waltz grabbed her face and flung her away.

"You shouldn't do that to miii-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-!" Cream charged in, only to be forced to veer off as Waltz targeted her with one hand and then as the rabbit child passed her, grabbed an ear and swung her around like a flail.

"Chhaaaaoooooo...!" Cheese yelped as Waltz backhanded the chao in the same moment she threw Cream at the Freedom Fighters.

"Mroooow...!" Tango fared little better in his own attempt.

A shadow loomed from behind the madwoman. "It's not nice to hurt my–oof!" Big began, but was cut off by a two-handed blow to the stomach followed by a burst of energy from Waltz's hands that flung him back.

Roll tried to engage her twisted doppelganger, but was cut off by the few remaining robot masters.

"Pathetic!" Waltz cackled. "All of you! Pathetic little pieces of–gah!"

"You are one to talk," Antoine glared from where he'd cut his gloating opponent, "nogg..."

Antoine was lifted off his feet as Waltz bum-rushed him from point blank range and kept charging recklessly towards the rest of the freedom fighters.

"Sugah-Tw–urk!" Bunnie's cry of concern was halted as Waltz closed in and grabbed her by the throat, allowing the cyborg lapine's husband to fall to the ground.

"Hold on Bunnie," Sally yelled as she and Rotor moved to engage, only to be forced to backstep as the mad machine swung her friend around at her in a wide arc and finished by throwing her at Rotor. To Rotor's credit, he caught Bunnie without losing his balance, but he was left open to Waltz's dive for his feet and was hefted up and over to smash face-first into the ground, only barely twisting enough to avoid landing on Bunnie.

But the maneuver left her open for a moment, and Sally took full advantage, charging with all the speed she'd learned from her hedgehog paramour and plunged her energy blade into the robot's side.

Instead of being rewarded with a cry of pain or other sign of victory, Sally instead found her arm grabbed by her target. She caught the barest glimpse of the robot's mad grin before she found five humming finger-cannons pointed at her face.

A blast of energy from off to the side hit Waltz's arm dead on and forced the limb wide before it fired and Sally managed to slip out of Waltz's grip as Roll, the Mega Woman, gained the insane robot's full attention.

"Aww, did you miss me?" Waltz grinned even as her newest injury sparked.

"Not on your life!" Roll yelled as she brought her combat broom into play and swung for Waltz's feet.

"It's so *good* to see you again!" Waltz's grin grew wider as she parried and dodged Roll's broom strikes while attempting to return fire as well as throwing a few punches and kicks of her own. "We haven't played in sooo long!"

Roll glowered as she spun her broom in ever more powerful strikes, determined to keep Waltz just out of physical contact.

"And you brought friends this time!" Waltz's line made Roll's circuits go cold as the mad robot began to move a hand to aim at Cream. "Let's see how long they last!"

Roll didn't even think. She lunged forward, leaving herself off balance, to knock the hand away from firing on the young rabbit. The shots missed Cream by a mile, but Roll was now completely open to her opponent.

"Got you!" Waltz cheered as she lunged into a grabbing strike at Roll's head that drove her into the ground. "Now–" (6)

Waltz cut off for a moment instead of following through on her strike. To the astonishment of everyone else, she stood up, stepped back, and began laughing. And laughing. The kind of laughter that many of those experienced in the wider multiverse associated with a man known as the Joker.

Roll got to her feet and began blasting Waltz as rapidly as she could, but her mad doppelganger simply kept laughing even as she ignored the hits and teleported out.

Her laughter continued to echo in the minds of all present.

"Was your mission successful?" the synthetic voice attempted to inquire over the laughter once again. This time though, the laughter died down. Slowly, but it did.

"Of course it was, love," Waltz grinned at the source of the voice. "And I made them hurt too. Why do you think I'm so happy?"

"Then everything goes according to plan," the voice concluded.

"Yes," Waltz purred. "Yes it does."

"I suggest you report for repairs," the voice added. "The final phase will begin soon."

"MUHAHAHAHAHA!" the broadcast laughter of both doctors echoed across the skies.

"You fools must all have a death wish!" Eggman continued.

"Witness our invincible battle fleet," the voice of Dr. Wily took over, "built by the hands of geniuses!"

"It's power..." the two proclaimed together, "unmatched throughout the universe!"

"Alright Eggman and Wily," Sonic grinned from where he, the rest of his team, and Team Dark had all touched down for their joint assault on the fleet, "let's get this party started!"

"Oh, my!" Cream gasped as the two teams soared through the air between ships. "We're up so high!"

"Don't you worry none, sugah Cream," Bunnie reassured her as they all bounded across a few supply platforms. "You just keep ya little ol' eyes on tha destination and ya'll be just fine."

The Chaotix did their best to parse the final mission instructions aboard the flagship of the Egg-Skull fleet. It wasn't easy with both of their clients bickering and trying to talk over each other, but details were gleaned.

"Right," Vector interrupted the clients, "you're each in your own locked cell. Each cell needs five keys for manual override that are guarded in different parts of the ship. Did I miss anything?"

"...no," both voices grumbled after a moment.

"So..." Shadow had moved slightly off from his team to talk with Sonic, "this Waltz character is looping?"

"Yeah," Sonic replied. "I met her back when we helped Rock and his buds get through their activation and she's a real piece of work. That crazy fighting style she was using on us back there? Apparently that's tame for her."

Shadow winced. Waltz had been blasting away with less rhyme or reason than Omega at his worst fought with, her wild shots killing any chance at organized retaliation, and that was *tame* ?!

"Apparently for some weird reason, she only Awakens when she touches Rock's sister Roll," Sonic continued.

"Which she probably has by this point," Shadow noted. "Assuming she attacked the rest of the teams like she did ours."

"Yep," Sonic nodded. "Roll contacted her bro with the whole story. Waltz grabbed her and pretty much lost whatever marbles she still had right there on the battlefield. Just laughed through being blasted repeatedly before teleporting out."

"Eggman and Wily detected ahead," Omega's voice cut in as the group closed in on the flagship's core.

"Time to party!" Bass grinned.

"Dr. Eggman!" Cream gasped as the teams skidded to a halt.

"Dr. Wily!" Roll called out to the other figure opposite the combined groups.

"Your mad plans end here doctors!" Sally declared.

"Yeah!" Amy interjected. "It's your fault that Sonic and I aren't together!"

As most of the group (aside from Big who was calling for Froggy again) sweatdropped, the two doctors in their mechs scoffed.

"Enough of this!" Wily sneered.

"Amy, Cream, Big, Mega Woman, Princess Sally, Antoine, Bunny, Rotor!" Eggman called out each of the doctors' gathered foes. "You face the combined might of our greatest personal battle crafts! The Egg Emperor!"

"And Wily Machine 25!" Dr. Wily completed the declaration as the mechs finished powering up. "Time to meet your makers!"

"You're gonna regret starting this fight!" Vector taunted as the Chaotix continued to wail on both the Egg Emperor and Wily Machine 25.

"It's not over yet you fools!" Wily growled back.

"W-we'll put an-n end to your s-s-schemes!" Ray yelled as he threw Shade at Wily's war machine.

"Stop before you get hurt," Shade agreed as she left a deep gouge in the mech's armor, Espio doing the same to Eggman's.

"Never!" Eggman yelled back, only for shots from Blues and the Sniper Joe to knock both mechs back off balance before they could finish recovering.

"Hey, Vector," Mighty grinned. "I think it's time to wrap this up."

"You took the words right out of my mouth," the crocodile grinned back.

"CHAOS..." Bass and Shadow yelled together, "CONTROL/BLAST!"

Both mechs shuddered from the crimson wave of power that washed over them despite being frozen in place, and the weapons barrage from Omega didn't improve matters for the doctors.

"Let's finish this!" Sonic yelled.

"Roger!" Rock agreed as he finished charging and the rest of his team lined up. "Overdrive Buster! Fire One! Fire Two! Fire Three!"

The energy-encased forms of Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles careened over, around, and through both mechs repeatedly.

"Defeated?!" Eggman yelled in disbelief as the freezing effects of Chaos Control wore off.

"Impossible!" Wily raged.

"NOOOOOOO!" they both yelled as what was left of their machines collapsed impotently.

The Freedom Fighters and Team Rose looked on as the mechanical bodies of the false Eggman and Wily disintegrated into liquid metal before their eyes, leaving behind a pair of welcome sights.

"FROGGY!" Big exclaimed in excitement as he ran to his friend.

"CHOCOLA!" Cream and Cheese were right behind him.

Amy and the Freedom Fighters smiled at the reunion while Roll did her best to keep Tango from pouncing on either of the rescuees.

"...os ..t. .a. b... ..p...d." (7)

"Sally girl?" Bunnie asked with concern. "Y'all right? Ya look like ya seen a ghost."

"It's..." Sally shook her head. "It's nothing Bunnie. Just thought I heard something."

"Hey," Cream interrupted the princess's train of thought, "isn't that Mister Sonic over there?"

"Aannnd we just lost Amy..." Rotor shook his head as the pink hedgehog tore across the craft's deck in renewed pursuit of her love interest.

"Well, that was fun," Sonic grinned. "Too bad Shadow and the others took off to go do something. We coulda had a party."

"Better use for this place than what it was built for," Rock agreed.

"Well, we can't rest too long," Knuckles decided to rain on the parade. "After all, each team made a detour to pick up the Chaos Emeralds for a reason. We've still go–"

"Sonic!" Tails landed on Knuckles's head and pointed behind the group. "Amy closing in from six o'clock!"

"Uh-oh!" Sonic turned just long enough to confirm the claim. "Gotta run!"

"...you did that on purpose," Rock observed as Sonic tore off down the deck with Amy in hot pursuit.

"Yep!" Tails grinned. "Any bets on whether Sonic can shake her before the real mastermind decides to reveal himself?"

"No," Knuckles scoffed. "The only way Sonic can lose her before that is to teleport out of her line of sight and we both know it." (8)

Rouge had seen this room more times than she cared to count, but the sight of millions of copies of Shadow still unnerved her. Honestly, why did she subject herself to this Loop after Loop?

"Preparing to destroy immediate area," the monotone voice of Omega sounded from behind her.

"Hey... Omega?" she started awkwardly. However much she knew about the truth surrounding Shadow's recovery, relating the possibilities to Omega never got less awkward. "Have I ever told you that Shadow might be a robot... and..."

It was even true. Shadow *had* been a robot several Loops and she didn't *actually* know if he was one this Loop or not. Shadow tended to be touchy about the subject after all. And of course no matter how often he'd proved to be a loyal friend, one could never be too certain about Omega's responses regarding possible creations of Eggman.

"You know about cloning," the robot's monotone was as comforting as it ever managed to sound as the robot progressed further into the room. "The original must exist somewhere."

Ah, that was why. The repeated proof that there was a heart underneath the arsenal of her heavily armed friend.

"And closer than you might think," the voice of Bass from the entrance nearly made her jump. The robot son of Wily idly scratched his robot wolf Treble behind the ears as he continued. "Trust me. I *know* how the original fights and even my dad, with all his practice trying, can't make a sophisticated copy that fights exactly like the original."

Huh. It looked like Omega wasn't the only one with hidden depths. But it looked like that was her team all around. Dark, violent exteriors hiding hearts of gold.

Or at least gold-plated C4. (9)

"Ready Mighty?" Vector grinned at the armadillo as they each took up positions in front of a door to the neighboring cells. The keys had... suffered an accident during the fight, which left them in need of a more... low-tech solution.

Mighty just grinned and reared back his fist as Vector followed suit.

"We're here to save you..." Vector called out as he caved the door in. "Dr. Wily, I presume."

"Doctor Wily?!" Espio nearly jumped in shock while Charmy gaped from a perch atop Blues's helmet at the so-named occupant of the cell.

"Why?" Vector grinned at his ninja friend. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"Er... I..." Espio slapped his face with his palm as he realized Vector had found him out and scored another point in their Loop competition. *'Busted.'* (10)

"Clearly your reputation is well deserved," Dr. Wily stood up, dusted himself off, and pocketed the walkie talkie he'd been using to communicate with the Chaotix.

"You knew it was me all along, didn't you?" Dr. Eggman asked from his seat amongst his makeshift transmitter.

"Like my friend would say," Mighty smirked, "it's all part of being a good detective."

"But you still tried to deceive us," Shade noted.

"Y-y-you're a r-rotten man!" Ray declared, half hiding behind the Sniper Joe.

"Whoa! Hold on!" Eggman interrupted quickly. "It's no trick! I truly plan on paying you!"

The Chaotix present looked skeptical as Dr. Eggman stood and pointed at them dramatically.

"As soon as I conquer the world," he declared, "I *will* pay you!"

"You know," Mighty cracked his knuckles ominously, "we have a... *policy* about clients who promise something they don't have..."

Around the Egg-Skull fleet, a storm began to brew.

"Now, my love?" Waltz inquired with eager anticipation.

"All lifeform data has been completely copied and compiled," the synthesized response came. "Our final transformation is imminent. It is time to make ourselves known. There is nothing that can be done to stop us."

"As amusing as this is," Dr. Wily interrupted the pummeling of Dr. Eggman from the entrance to his cell, "I'm afraid that Ivo is the only one present who knows the full scope of what is happening."

"Oh, for the love of..." Eggman wheezed out as Mighty dropped him and Shade and Ray backed off, "how did *you* get a pass?!"

" *I* actually had the funds to pay," Dr. Wily grinned. "After all, I *did* once manage to make a convincing billionaire philanthropist." (11)

"Yeah," Vector agreed with a happy tone, "and since Pogo Man had some portable device on him, Doc Wily's paid in full. He even threw in a nice bonus if we promised him a recording of your beatdown."

At that declaration, the Sniper Joe that had been standing by silently reached up to his helmet and extracted a USB drive that he then handed to Wily. The doctor blinked before taking it, muttering something about rogue units under his breath.

"Don't push your luck," the Joe warned.

"Never crossed my mind..." Wily eyed the green robot warily.

"Regardless," Espio cut in before turning to the Eggman, "Dr. Wily says that you know who is behind all of this. So who is it that kidnapped the both of you and stole your identities?"

Dr. Eggman sighed heavily in defeat. "It was..."

Bass ran alongside Treble and the rest of Team Dark to where the Mega Dweeb had sent the message from, a grin on his face. Finally, a challenge!

Not the pathetic excuses for war machines the robot replicas of his dad and his most hated enemy (above and beyond Dr. Light if that could be believed). Not the wastes of space that were the mass-produced robot masters lined up ready for deployment alongside all the robo-Shadow clones. No, a real challenge to prove once and for all that he was the stronge–

Bass caught sight of who he and his kinda-sorta-allies were racing to face off against and skidded to a halt, swearing a blue streak in his processing circuits.

Sonic looked up at the familiar figure as Roll swore at the sight of the second. The upcoming fight might be one he was well-used to, but it was still against a very powerful opponent. One who essentially required no less than a full super form to seriously challenge, and even with all the tricks and powers he'd picked up in the Loops, he still wasn't able to pull off that kind of strength untransformed.

Of course... if he could just smack down every super-enemy that came along without breaking a sweat... well, he'd never have any fun.

"You shall understand. Once you shed your flesh and join me, you will see these pathetic creatures as I do."

When she saw who was standing atop the central tower of the flagship, Sally had to reassure herself that she could handle this. It didn't matter what had happened to her that one Loop, she could do what needed to be done. She'd gotten over it.

But then she heard the synthetic laugh, the same voice she'd thought she'd heard earlier, and realized that she really hadn't.

High atop the spire jutting from the tallest control tower on the Egg-Skull flagship stood two figures looking down upon the teams of heroes (and anti-heroes) arrayed against them. One was the advanced technology clone of Mega Woman known as Waltz. The other was a transformed version of a robot known to Sonic and his friends as Metal Sonic. (12)

"Mmm," Waltz purred as she stared down with malicious glee, her voice carrying over the thunder of the storm to her foes, "I sooo want

to thank you for this, love."

"Yes," the synthetic voice of Metal Sonic, or Neo Metal Sonic in this form, agreed, "with the power of Chaos, the weapons of your father's Robot Masters, and the skills of our foes, we shall reign supreme. All living things shall kneel before their master and mistress!"

"No, not that," Waltz grinned and caressed her companion.

"Then what, my queen?" the ultimate creation of Dr. Eggman asked.

"It's just..." Waltz smiled at him, cupped his chin and brought their faces closer. "I've never gotten to kill someone who actually loved me before."

"Wha–" Metal Sonic tried to say in confusion before his head exploded due to multiple point-blank energy blasts from Waltz's finger cannons. (13)

Waltz turned to grin maniacally down at the assembled teams that were now staring at her in horror, including the newly arriving Chaotix and both doctors.

"I don't care if you kneel before me or not!" she yelled as she raised her hand high over her head. " *I'll kill everyone regardless* !"

And then lightning from the storm struck her form, and the control tower beneath her exploded.

The gathered heroes, anti-heroes, and villainous doctors stared as the debris from the control tower reassembled itself into a massive menacing form. Gargantuan cannons with equally massive blades strapped to them for fingers sat at the end of giant arms leading to a proportionately giant vaguely feminine torso. The legs extended down among the remains of the tower and seemed to be temporarily trapped there. At the top, Waltz herself seemed to melt and flow,

becoming a monstrous gorgon-like head with three demonic eyes and writhing snake-like cables in place of hair.

"...And here I'd hoped that your metal minion would have been a tempering influence on my insane creation," Dr. Wily said to the Eggman.

"It's hopeless!" Dr. Eggman wailed, ignoring his hated rival in the field of mad science. "She's obviously stolen the combined data from all of you and melded it with the power of Chaos that Metal Sonic extracted from your kidnapped companions! Along with the powers of both of our finest creations, she is effectively invincible! If only we had the seven Chaos Emeralds, we might stand a chance, but–"

"Oh, this old thing?" Dr. Wily pulled one of the gems out of his coat. "I must say, it's been absolutely fascinating to study these past few months, but if it's a choice between discovery and my life... Well, one can't discover anything when they're dead."

"So that's where the last one went to!" Sonic chuckled as each of the six teams pulled out a Chaos Emerald of their own. "I was wondering about that!"

"But..." Dr. Eggman gaped, "but she is still more powerful than anything you have ever faced before! Even *with* the Emeralds it would take a miracle!"

"Hey, just leave it to us!" Sonic grinned as Rock, Tails, Knuckles, and Rock's robo-dog Rush joined him.

"Don't forget us!" Roll insisted, her robot cat Tango following and the form of her eldest brother with Beat perched upon his shoulder standing with her.

"Bass? Shadow?" Rock offered the two anti-heroes.

"Hmph," Bass scoffed. "Yeah, right. You're gonna need time to power up, so someone's gotta buy it for you."

"Indeed," Shadow grinned as Treble barked eagerly. "So it might as well be someone competent."

"And what are we?" Vector growled. "Chopped liver?"

"We will flank her from behind," Shade stepped in front of the Chaotix leader and silently reminded him of the more pressing issue. "Team Rose and the Freedom Fighters will flank from the sides."

"And we shall annihilate the opposition head-on," Omega intoned.

"Better hurry up," Bass taunted. "Take too long and we might not leave anything for you."

Roll snorted in amusement. "Just don't get yourselves blown up."

"Hey, Sal!" Sonic called to the leader of the Freedom Fighters. "Why don't you join the party? Let's see if we can set a record for super modes here!"

"I..." Sally closed her eyes for a moment. Metal Sonic was gone, leaving his insane slayer as arguably the more dangerous opponent. "Yes," she said before moving to join the other six.

"Well then," Rock smiled, "let's show Waltz the true power of *teamwork* !"

"I can't believe she just killed him like that!" Cream worried as the various teams raced up to the platforms atop the pillars that Waltz's gigantic form was trapped between. "Even if he did kidnap Chocola and Froggy..."

"Believe it rugrat," Bass growled in his super adaptor armor. "My 'dear sister' has been a monster since day one."

"All tha more reason ta cut her back down ta size," Bunnie added from where she was carrying Antoine and Rotor upwards.

"Less yappin' and more scrappin'!" Vector yelled back from where the Chaotix was nearing the top. "Banzai!"

"Honestly," Rock spoke just low enough that Dr. Wily couldn't overhear as he and his siblings finished engaging their super adaptors with their robot animal companions, "what I'm most worried about is that loopers tend to keep power ups between Loops, which means Waltz is going to be like this again. Probably often."

"Eh," Sonic waved off his friend's concern, "it's not as big a deal as you might think. Most loopers figure this out sooner or later, but you don't always keep what you pick up. Information you tend to keep, but powers can be trickier. Many are kinda 'use it or lose it', which is why we don't have a gajillion loopers with identical abilities out there, but in this case what's important is that you just can't keep powers in the Loops if you can't even keep them to the end of the Loop you pick them up."

"So..." Roll digested that, "there's a way to depower Waltz so she doesn't keep this form between Loops?"

"Oh, yeah," Knuckles grinned.

"We do it all the time with Metal Sonic, actually," Tails clarified. "We beat him down in super mode and he reverts back to ordinary Metal Sonic afterwards. He can't even hold the 'neo' form you saw earlier when we're done."

"Really?" Blues smirked. "How thorough is this?"

"Thorough enough that he needs to re-scan everyone the next time he tries to make an ultimate skill gestalt," Sally replied diplomatically. Several present noted that she seemed less nervous with Waltz's giant transformation than she had with the relatively untransformed Metal Sonic.

"Well, let's get this super party started," Sonic told the others. "I haven't tried this many super modes at once before, so this could take a bit..."

"Raaaahh!" Vector yelled as he blasted Waltz's back with his flame breath. Shade, Espio, and the Sniper Joe were peppering the relatively unguarded area of their foe with explosives, ninja blades, and plasma blasts while Charmy, Ray, and Mighty dive-bombed the giant foe repeatedly.

"We're not doing enough damage this way!" Espio cursed.

"Then it's time to go big!" Vector grinned as he whipped out his enchanted microphone, signaling for the Chaotix's finishing maneuvers.

"DIE YOU PATHETIC INSECTS!" Waltz yelled as she tried to blast away at the tiny forms assaulting her. The immense power of her current form was proving... a bit less capable of precision targeting. Even so, she was shooting blasts the size of small houses from her enlarged finger cannons, which meant that even misses were proving potentially hazardous.

"You're a mean lady!" Cream yelled as she and Cheese assaulted Waltz's left leg with Amy right behind with her hammer.

"It's..." Big yelled as he punctuated each word with a mighty punch, "not... nice... to... hurt... people!"

"Wow, you're even uglier up close," Rouge taunted as she weaved around a ludicrous amount of missile fire from the writhing cables her foe had for hair while her overly destructive teammates returned similarly ludicrous amounts of weapons fire themselves.

Antoine's blade was a blur of reflective flashes as he dashed around, cutting at the right leg of his opponent while blasts of sonic energy and lasers tore into the gashes he cut in the armor.

Unfortunately, it seemed like Waltz was getting tired of playing around as the giant finger cannons on their side began charging up to obliterate not just them, but the pillar they were standing on top of.

"CHAOS SPEAR!" the dual cries from both Shadow and Bass heralded the powerful precision yellow blasts of chaos energy that impacted each of Waltz's giant elbows and threw her aim off before she could take out both Team Rose and the Freedom Fighters with the charged cannons.

"YOU LITTLE–" Waltz began to curse before a blast to the face from Omega caused her to flinch and flail wildly.

Ray reached the apex of his assisted jump and prepared to throw Shade and Mighty even higher when he spotted the flailing arm of Waltz's for coming straight at him. Without thinking, he threw his teammates higher and did his best to brace for impact.

"Ray!" Shade and Mighty yelled as their friend was batted out of the air and down to the deck far below.

The enraged face of Waltz turned back to the team in front of her and brought all of her weapons to bear on them.

"AND NOW YOU DI–"

"MIGHTY IMPACT!" the armadillo yelled as he impacted with the center of Waltz's back even as the sonic blast from Vector, Espio, and Charmy's 'Chaotix Recital' slammed home as well.

When the giant form of Waltz arched her back in pain instead of firing, Team Dark didn't waste a moment.

"CHAOS... CONTROL/BLAST!"

"Are... are they winning?" the voice cut into Ray's thoughts as he came to. Dr. Eggman it sounded like.

"ENOUGH!" the booming voice of the giant Waltz caused him to wake up just in time to see the misshapen form of the mad robot sprout metal wings that resembled a twisted nightmarish version of angel wings and which, with a single flap, tore her violently from between the pillars the teams had been using to mount their assault. **"I AM THE ANGEL OF THE APOCALYPSE! THE TIME FOR YOU AND ALL YOU HOLD DEAR IS AT AN END!"**

"No," the voice of Dr. Wily replied more calmly than could reasonably be expected in the current situation. "No they are not."

Ray looked away from the giant mad avatar of annihilation to look for the doctors, only to instead see himself in the middle of a ring of seven figures, four mobians and three robots, with the Chaos Emeralds rotating faster and faster around them. How in the world had he landed here unnotice–

Ray's thoughts were cut off as the Chaos Emeralds unleashed their power in a blinding flash of light that washed over the seven figures and rushed towards the center where he lay before bursting back out again. When Ray finished blinking the spots from his eyes, he beheld the circle of floating super forms. The familiar golden-yellow form of Super Sonic, flanked by the interestingly pink form of Hyper Knuckles and the golden-eyed form of Supreme Sally (or whatever it was she'd decided to call her super form this Loop, Ray hadn't exactly kept up) wearing the Ring of Acorns like a circlet and wielding the Sword of Acorns in her hand. Then there was the bright form of Turbo Tails, though without the atypical cape he sometimes had, followed by the golden-yellow and white, silver and white, and

bronze and white forms of Super Mega Man, Super Mega Woman, and Super Proto Man.

All of whom were staring at him.

"Well, look who's joined the super club!" Super Sonic smirked.

Ray blinked, wondering what his friend was talking about, and then blinked again when everyone continued to stare straight at him. Taking a moment to glance at himself, he beheld the same golden-yellow color of Super Sonic radiating from his own fur. The fact that he too was floating in the air took a few more moments to register.

"I-I'm...?" Ray stuttered in disbelief.

"Super Ray!" Turbo Tails cheered. (14)

"Congrats, buddy," Hyper Knuckles smirked. **"We'll throw you a party later, but for now we've got a mad giant robot with Chaos powers on the loose."**

"You up for it?" Super Proto Man asked the unexpected addition to the super-form strike force.

"Y-y-y-y..." the just-now-getting-what-happened Super Ray stuttered for a moment before deciding to just nod with determination.

"Then let us show Waltz the folly of her actions," Supreme Sally intoned formally.

"Let's do it to it!" Super Mega Man and Super Mega Woman agreed in unison before taking off.

"Hey!" Super Sonic yelled as he followed them. **"That's my line!"**

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" the giant twisted demonic angel for of Waltz laughed as the squad of super forms approached her.

"HOW KIND OF YOU TO OFFER YOURSELVES AS THE FIRST SACRIFICES TO THE ANGEL OF THE APOCALYPSE!"

"Alright everyone!" Super Mega Woman called out as they all faced off against what she was now thinking of as Apocalypse Waltz for expediency's sake. **"Let's show her what we're made of!"** (15)

The ten massive cannons of Apocalypse Waltz wasted no time in training themselves on the eight super warriors and opened fire even as the snake-like coils passing as hair launched a ludicrous amount of missiles, her three mad eyes blasted away with crystalline energy bolts and even her wings shot out bladed projectiles that only vaguely resembled feathers and homed in on their targets.

It was a barrage that would later be described as 'something that would make Mecha-Godzilla wet his pants'.

The super warriors waited as the volley closed in before making their move. The blades of Supreme Sally and Super Proto Man lashed out and batted the massive plasma blasts back at Apocalypse Waltz, Super Mega Man and Super Mega Woman unleashed massive blasts from their arm cannons that obliterated the missile barrage, Turbo Tails and Hyper Knuckles batted the immense blades aside, and Super Sonic and the newly joined Super Ray powered through the crystalline energy blasts in a way that shattered them utterly.

"You know, Ivo," Dr. Wily spoke up conversationally, "it occurs to me that it is my mad creation up there facing off against the greatest concentration of super forms ever assembled. Not yours." (16)

Dr. Eggman sputtered and fumed for a few seconds before finding his voice. "Only because she stabbed him in the back, Al! Until then *my* mad creation was the one running the show!"

"It also occurs to me that you have this atrocious track record for keeping the loyalty of your free-willed, and for that matter semi-free-willed, minions," Wily retorted calmly. "Waltz is an aberration among

my creations, while your Metal Sonic seems quite typical for your higher-end AIs."

"YOU DARE DOUBT MY GENIUS?!"

"That assumes you possess such a quality in the first place."

"You are DEAD when this is over, do you hear me?!" Eggman screamed himself red in the face.

"Anytime, anywhere, you rotund waste of space!" Wily shot back.

"I'll have you know I've regularly fought both Sonic *and* Mega Man to a standstill!" Eggman roared.

"So?" Wily scoffed. "It's always with your personal war machines. And I've got better ones. Both in capability and craftsmanship."

"I *also* have multiple black belts in several martial arts!" Eggman boasted as he started dancing around like a boxer.

"Yes, yes," Wily waved him off. "And that chameleon isn't the only ninja on board this flying tub."

"You?!" Eggman stared. "A ninja? Don't make me laugh! And what are *you* all staring at?!"

"Oh, don't mind us," Mighty told the two as he passed Shade a bucket of popcorn he was holding. Several others were being passed around the remaining team members as they alternated watching the battle in the sky and the arguing doctors. (17)

Hyper Knuckles smashed the first battleship that Apocalypse Waltz threw their way while Super Proto Man bisected the next one with his blade. It wasn't the first volley of thrown battleships at the group and, with the way Apocalypse Waltz once again dived down into the cloud cover for more, it wasn't looking like the last.

"Geez," Hyper Knuckles began as he prepared himself for the next assault, **"I'm starting to wonder just how many of these she has left."**

"Hey guys!" Super Sonic called out. **"Team maneuver time!"**

"Ready?" Super Proto Man turned to the glowing pink echidna and reformed his blade into his arm cannon.

"Oh, yeah," Hyper Knuckles grinned as he positioned himself in front of the barrel and revved up a Super Spin Dash.

"SUPER OVERDRIVE BUSTER!" three cries sounded out as Super Sonic, Turbo Tails, and Hyper Knuckles were fired through the thrown battleships in the center of energy blasts that each had a radius of at least fifty feet. A moment later and Super Ray and Supreme Sally were following behind encased in their own super-sized blasts.

The five blasts tore through Apocalypse Waltz, sending shattered metal flying in all directions, before she moved to counter.

" *CHAOS CONTROL!* "

The five super-charged blasts halted in mid-air as all eight of the super form warriors were frozen in place, unable to do anything as Apocalypse Waltz simply pulled her body back together as good as new. But she wasn't done yet.

" *CHAOS BLAST!* "

The massive sphere of power tore away the immense plasma auras around the five closer figures like a strong wind blowing away a fog and sending them tumbling away, and continuing on to do the same to the three super robots that had fired the blasts in the first place. And then Apocalypse Waltz started firing everything in her arsenal with wild abandon in every conceivable direction. (18)

"SHIELDS!" Both Dr. Wily and Dr. Eggman cried in a panic as they saw what was headed for the flagship.

Something on the ship must have heard them, or at least identified the incoming threat as such, and had indeed turned on the shields just in time. The flagship bucked and tilted wildly as the blasts that weren't even aimed at the ship hammered away relentlessly at its protections.

Super Ray had the dubious fortune of being knocked further away than the rest and was thus released from the temporal freeze of Chaos Control in just enough time to begin dodging. But he wasn't just content to dodge. He was also determined to weave his way through and bring the attack back to Apocalypse Waltz as well.

And so he did. He wove past the immense plasma shots, the spray of missiles, the gigantic homing blades, and powered through the crystalline energy blasts. He was getting closer. Soon he'd be through the barrage and close enough that his foe wouldn't know what hit her. He weaved around a final energy blast and saw his target just in front of him.

He didn't quite see the rising backhand that sent him flying straight upwards.

"Everyone still super?" Super Sonic shook his head clear as the barrage abated.

"Yes," Supreme Sally replied calmly.

"Same here," Super Mega Man chimed in, **"but I don't think it'll hold through another one of those."**

"Yeah," Turbo Tails agreed. **"We need to think of something fast."**

Super Ray finally started losing enough momentum to bring himself to a stop somewhere in the upper atmosphere and took stock. His super form didn't feel like it was going to last too much longer. Maybe just long enough for one more good shot from this distance. Fortunately, he'd picked up a little something from a fused Loop that he'd been saving for an occasion like this one.

Maybe not exactly like this though. The whole super form thing was something he hadn't expected in his wildest dreams.

"Ok-k-kay... Y-y-you can-n-n d-do this... J-just lik-ke D-d-d-domon taugh-ght you..." Super Ray stuttered to himself as energy began to gather around his hand.

Super Proto Man stared up in the direction that Super Ray had been sent in and started grinning. **"I think someone already has. We just need to keep Waltz distracted and maybe hold her still for a bit."**

"Shadow taught us the Chaos Bind," Super Sonic grinned.

"And Sonic showed me earlier," Super Mega Man added before sending the pertinent data to his siblings.

"Sounds like a plan," Supreme Sally gave a slight smile.

The seven forms darted around Apocalypse Waltz, taking pot shots and in general making sure her attention was kept on them. After a few moments, all seven were positioned around their mutual foe and nodded at each other.

"CHAOS BIND!" they yelled in unison, sending out chaos energy that wrapped around Apocalypse Waltz and held her tight.

"Th-th-this hand of m-m-m-mine is-s-s sh-sh-shining-ng g-gold..."

"YOU THINK THIS CAN HOLD ME?! YOU'LL RUN OUT OF POWER LONG BEFORE I WILL! AND THEM I'LL CARVE YOUR SKIN FROM YOUR FLESH AND THAT OF ALL YOUR FRIENDS TO MAKE MYSELF A NEW DRESS!" Apocalypse Waltz screamed at them. **"IT'S HOPELESS!"**

"It-t-t's gr-r-reat cry t-tells me t-to gras-s-sp F-f-freedom!"

"There's always hope," Super Mega Man retorted as he held the bindings firm.

"In fact," Super Sonic grinned, **"we've got a Ray of it on the way right now."**

"...WHAT?" Apocalypse Waltz's face scrunched up in grotesque confusion and in response each of the seven super form opponents holding her in place with their power extended a finger upwards.

Despite herself, Apocalypse Waltz looked up.

"SH-SHININ–"

Apocalypse Waltz had just enough time to widen her three demonic eyes in shock before Super Ray tore straight through the center one like a bullet through tissue paper. She held that pose for a moment as the Chaos energy bindings around her were release before turning her now two-eyed gaze on her surrounding foes.

"HEHEHEHE..." she began laughing. **"HAHAHAHAHA! *THAT* WAS YOUR RAY OF HOPE?!"**

"ray..." came a muffled sound from within Apocalypse Waltz, causing her to cut off her rant and glance down at her torso in confusion. (19)

"Oh, I hope someone's recording this," Hyper Knuckles grinned.

"In high definition," Super Mega Woman smiled back.

"...BURST!"

The voice heralded a massive explosion of golden energy that ripped Apocalypse Waltz to shreds like an overstuffed piñata being busted open.

As the largest piece of Apocalypse Waltz's head fell to the deck of the Egg-Skull fleet's flagship, it began to shimmer and melt into a liquid metal which shrank and reformed into the more normal and familiar figure of the normal Waltz in time for her to impact harshly. A fair bit worse for wear, Waltz still struggled to sit up, only to find herself surrounded by nineteen (well, seventeen plus two mad doctors hanging at the back) rather annoyed heroes and anti-heroes.

"CHAOS SPEAR!" Waltz wasted no time in thrusting a hand forward and trying to continue the battle, only for a whole lot of nothing to emerge.

Many eyebrows were raised at the lack of action.

"...Chaos Spear?" she shook her thrust-out hand in puzzlement as if to ask why it wasn't raining death and destruction on those before her, and was rewarded with a few sparks from short-circuits in her finger cannons.

"Give it up Waltz," came the voice of Roll as she and the other super warriors touched down and descended from their super forms. "You've lost. All of your stolen power is gone and what remains is in no shape to fight."

Waltz began laughing, causing more sparks to emerge from her damaged form. "It's so weird, isn't it? Why do I always have to rain

death and destruction on everyone? Why do I kill my only allies instead of making friends...?"

"You know," Rock spoke in a low, hesitantly hopeful, tone, "in this moment she actually seems like someone worth trying to save."

"Oh, right!" Waltz barked with amusement. "Because I enjoy it so much!"

"Moment's passed," Bass glowered as he and Omega took aim and fired. The rapid-fire barrage continued for several seconds until all that was left was a few smoldering remains.

"Well," Vector dusted his hands off when it looked like there wouldn't be any last-second resurrections, "looks like another case wrapped up! Time to head home fellas."

"But..." Charmy began hesitantly, "doesn't Eggman still owe us money?"

"Yes..." Shade agreed lowly as she unsheathed her leech blades. "Yes, he does."

"There he goes," Espio pointed off to the side where Dr. Eggman was doing a poor job of trying to tiptoe away.

"Get back here you slimeball!" Vector yelled as he led the Chaotix in a charge after the rotund, yet surprisingly speedy, doctor.

"Y-yeah!" Ray agreed as he brought up the rear. (20)

"Sonic! You were so brave and handsome and..." Amy glomped onto her blue hero, only to trail off in confusion as she realized she was holding a rather convincing Sonic mannequin instead of the real deal. "Hey! Who put this here?!"

"Come on," Sally sighed to the rest of the Freedom Fighters as Amy charged off in pursuit of Sonic, "let's go catch her before she embarrasses herself further."

"Doctor Wily," the Sniper Joe interrupted the man as he was attempting to discreetly exit in his saucer and handed him an envelope. "This is for your eyes only. Read and consider the contents."

Wily looked over the rather official looking envelope before pocketing it and addressing the messenger. "You know, one of these days I *am* going to figure out why you went rogue."

"Unlikely," the Sniper Joe replied before sending out a signal to which an automated hover cycle responded. The renegade robot mounted the cycle and sped off, followed by the MET unit that he'd somehow managed to take control of while Wily shook his head and sped off in his flying saucer. (21)

"Thank you for the ride Miss Roll, Mister Blues," Cream said politely as she stepped on the Tango Jet while Big made himself comfortable on top of the Beat Plane Blues was piloting.

"No problem," Roll smiled at the young rabbit as she and her brother took off to transport the two non-looping heroes home.

"So," Knuckles asked Rouge, "what are you going to do now?"

"Oh, I think I'll stick around with the boys for a bit," the treasure hunter smiled as she glanced at the rest of this Loop's Team Dark. "They want to blow up whatever's left of the fleet and I'd like to see if there's anything interesting I might want to keep before they slag it."

"Have fun," Knuckles chuckled and waved as he moved to follow Rock and Tails as they went off to find Sonic's hiding spot before Amy did.

Dr. Wily set his saucer to autopilot and removed the envelope. Considering it for a moment, he gave in to his curiosity and unsealed the envelope, unfolded the letter, and began to read. As he did his eyebrows began to climb their way slowly up his forehead. When he

reached the end he calmly put the letter down, turned the contents over in his head, and decided that he was sufficiently intrigued enough to ask for clarification from the source.

Typing away at his control panel, a communications screen opened up and fluxed with static for a few moments before resolving into an image of a gray-haired human in military uniform with the emblem of G.U.N. in the wall behind him.

"What is the meaning of this!" the man spat angrily. "How did you get this frequen–ah... Dr. Wily. I take it you got our offer."

"Yes Commander," Wily steepled his fingers calculatingly, "I did. And I'm quite intrigued as to why the leader of a government organization rather openly opposed to anything I do is offering not just a cease-fire, but what is almost a blank check for resources and development provided I agree to actively work against Ivo."

"As you may have noticed, Dr. Eggman is becoming an ever-increasing global threat," the Commander began. "And while we are opposed to your goals of world domination, between you and the Eggman you are the *vastly* preferable option. If only because you have come to this world's defense against outside invading forces before. At not insignificant risk to your own safety I might add."

Dr. Wily mused on that for a bit. A few years ago, before he'd finished building Bass, a group of alien conquerors known as the Stardroids had landed. When it became evident that he couldn't control them for his own ends, he'd brought his forces to bear against them instead. After all, this was his world and he'd be damned if he was going to let a few alien upstarts take it from him. It... hadn't gone well for him or his forces. On the bright side, the alien tech he'd salvaged from them was just what he needed to make Bass his finest creation (not that he'd ever admit it within earshot of the boy) and enhance his later series of robot masters.

Ivo on the other hand... The opportunistic parasite had held back and sent his forces into areas that had been devastated and weakened

to take control and fortify while everyone else was focused on the invasion. And when it was over, thanks to Light's creations and a few young teen mobians calling themselves the Freedom Fighters, Ivo had tried to press his advantage while the rest of the world was trying to rebuild. It wasn't a bad tactic to be honest, and Wily probably would have tried it himself had he come out of the initial engagements better, but the fact remained that Ivo only had the resources because he was too much of a coward to stand up for his own claim to the world. The man didn't care if the world was burnt to a cinder so long as he could claim the ashes.

Unbidden, a parody of a common airline message ran through Wily's head. *'We know you have a choice in genius conquerors and we thank you for choosing Wily.'* (22)

"Understood Commander," Dr. Wily allowed himself a satisfied smile. "Now... let's talk details."

"Oh, man," Sonic pleaded with Tails, "not the Pokemon Loop story again..."

"Pokemon Loop?" Rock raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Tails grinned. "It's a place where people catch, raise, and battle an endless array of monsters they can store in special balls that can shrink and fit in their pockets. And, no, it's generally not inhumane at all, but you really need to experience it for yourself to get that."

"Okay," Rock agreed hesitantly, gesturing for the fox to continue even as Knuckles chortled away and Sonic tried to moan loud enough to drown Tails out.

"Anyway," Tails snickered, "anytime we end up there as trainers, Sonic only ever manages to catch one thing. By the end of the Loop, all of the Leagues are calling his team 'Sonic's Spearows'..."

Knuckles broke out in laughter as Sonic buried his face in his hands, and even Rock chuckled a bit despite most of the joke going over his head.

"So..." Rock mused, "if I went there, my team might be known as the Mega Mon?"

Knuckles froze at that question and Sonic perked back up instantly.

"Hey, Knuckles," Sonic grinned. "That reminds me of that one Loops where Angel Island was like that Jamaica place in the Hub..."

"Sonic..." Knuckles growled.

"Come on, Knux," the hedgehog wasn't dissuaded in the slightest, "do the accent."

"So you were once an island brudda too?" the sudden Jamaican accent did *not* come from Knuckles. A gobsmacked Sonic turned to stare open-mouthed at Rock, the source of the voice.

"Yeah, mon," Rock grinned, keeping the accent up. "One Loop I was da Mega Mon, layin' da smack down on bad ol' Docta Wily when'ver he rear his ugly head. I hadda fight da Rasta Mon, da Bobsled Mon, da Panto Mon, da Sprint Mon, da Cycle Mon, da Steel Mon, da Rugby Mon, and da Docta Bird Mon. So it good ta meet anudda brudda." (23)

Sonic kept staring as Rock held out his fist to Knuckles.

"Respect."

Knuckles, who had also been staring (though not gaping), blinked, grinned, and bumped his fist with Rock's.

"Respect."

"Well," Rouge stretched in the secondary bridge (the main one having been part of the control tower that was blown up and reformed into Waltz's giant body), "we've searched this thing from bow to stern and pretty much taken everything even remotely useful that we could carry. So... time to hit the self-destruct and watch the fireworks?"

"Finally we shall give the creation of Eggman the fiery fate it deserves," Omega intoned.

"Hmph," Shadow smirked. "Yes, indeed we sh–"

Shadow was cut off as the deck beneath their feet was rocked by an explosion.

"...I hope that was one of you," Rouge stated as she looked at each of her teammates in turn.

"No dice Bats," Bass frowned as he peered off to the side to where Treble was growling at something.

"Indeed," a synthetic voice intoned as a mass of liquid rose up from the corner and resolved itself into the form of Neo Metal Sonic. "My traitorous queen was... less thorough with my demise than she should have been. Unfortunately for you." (24)

Anyone who was outside of the flagship watching would have heard muffled violence and seen the immense craft shudder slightly as it slowly descended.

Bass coughed dust out of his systems as he flexed the wings of his super adaptor armor. Apparently this 'Neo' Metal Sonic wasn't the chump he'd assumed. Their predicament wasn't pretty. Neo Metal Sonic had sabotaged the engines, sending the flagship into a slow but steady crash dive. One that he was confident about not only surviving, but killing his opponents. The battle was supposedly to

keep them from evacuating before the airship crashed, but Bass had a feeling that Neo Metal Sonic was aiming to see if he could kill them before that happened.

It was something he'd have done in the same situation.

"I may have been stripped of all but the most basic powers of Chaos by my traitorous queen," the menacing blue robot proclaimed as he stepped out into the chamber the fight had moved to, "but I still possess the data of yourselves as well as that of the other 'heroes' of this world and the full arsenal of both Eggman's and Wily's most powerful creations. You cannot defeat me."

"Enemy power greater than anticipated," Omega allowed. "Preparing appropriate response."

"You seem pretty confident," Shadow grinned in anticipation. "You must not really know who we are."

"Bass, the most powerful and able of Dr. Wily's creations," Neo Metal Sonic replied calmly as his hands formed into Metal Blades and he moved into a combat stance. "E-123 Omega, the most concentrated form of standard military firepower Dr. Eggman has ever constructed. Shadow, the 'ultimate lifeform'. Your broken bodies shall serve as a testament to my new power."

"Hey!" Rouge protested at the blatant omission from the list of valued opponents. "What am I? Chopped liver?!"

"Not yet," Neo Metal Sonic stated as he charged.

All across the ship, alarms blared loudly.

"Black Wave!" Rouge yelled as she launched the dark energy projectile at Neo Metal Sonic, only for it to splash off of a skull-shaped forcefield.

"An inferior attempt," Neo Metal Sonic taunted as he turned towards her. "This is how it is done."

With that, Neo Metal Sonic shot a Black Wave of his own at her. She dodged easily, but realized too late that he'd actually fired a spread of Black Waves and caught the second in the leg, making her muscles seize up as the stunning effect of her own technique hit her.

"Annihilate," Omega attempted to take advantage of Neo Metal Sonic's distraction to shoot him, but the forcefield was still in place. Plus, as the blue robot formed one of his hands into the same style of gatling gun as Omega and returned fire, it seemed that the barrier was one-way.

"Your efforts are futile," Neo Metal Sonic stated firmly. "I have all of your powers and more. Chaos Spear."

The last was accompanied by a blast of yellow energy that clipped Shadow's shoulder as he tried to teleport inside the robot hedgehog's guard.

"You think you're so tough?!" Bass yelled as he came careening straight for Neo Metal Sonic on his super adaptor's jet propulsion systems, firing repeatedly ahead of him. Team Dark's adversary fired back, but the crossfire from Bass prevented accurate aim and even then he was coming in too fast to be stopped by enemy fire. "You think having our powers makes you better?!"

Bass crashed into Neo Metal Sonic's shield with enough force to send them both tumbling across the floor. They skidded to a stop grappling with one another, Bass pinned beneath their mutual foe.

"Let's see how you handle us using yours!" the son of Wily growled as the air around him began to ionize. "Joint Matrix: Burst Shield!"

A bright flash blinded the others as the weapon activated, but when their sight returned, they saw an unharmed Neo Metal Sonic

encased in an eight-sided diamond barrier known as the Black Shield.

"I can handle anything you can dish out," he leered.

The massive flagship finally broke through the bottom of the cloud layer and continued its descent towards the ground.

Neo Metal Sonic unleashed twin blasts of ice and fire from each arm at his opponents, causing them to jump back. The four members of Team Dark exchanged glances and nodded to each other. Shadow jumped into a Spin Dash on the barrel of Bass's arm cannon while Rouge did the same with Omega on the far side of their mutual opponent.

"Eat this!" Bass yelled as he took to the air and fired Shadow at the would-be robot overlord.

"Fire!" Omega intoned a moment later as he did the same with Rouge.

"A futile effort," the enhanced robot hedgehog backhanded Shadow out of the air contemptuously and spun on the counter's momentum to do the same with Rouge.

"Chaos Control!" the yell from Shadow heralded Neo Metal Sonic freezing in mid-air, unable to defend as Rouge blasted into his lower body, sending the robot tumbling. The tumble took the blue robot towards the spot where Bass was now crouching in preparation to pounce.

"You're finished!" Bass grinned maliciously as he began to emit a wild and powerful energy field. "V! MAXIMUM! OVERDRIVE!"

Bass's attack slammed into Metal Sonic and drove him up through the ceiling, and every obstacle between there and the deck.

"Exploding bullets are loaded," Rouge explained quickly as she climbed up onto Omega's shoulder.

"Then let's go," Shadow stated from Omega's other shoulder as the robot intoned his gleeful anticipation and Rouge took aim at thin air. "Chaos Control!"

"Bla–"

The attack matrix sputtered out just after Bass breached the top deck and he felt his systems seize up as Neo Metal Sonic took aim at his stalling form.

"Farewe–"

"–ck Wave!" the stunning energy of Rouge's attack struck Neo Metal Sonic point-blank as the remaining three members of Team Dark teleported directly between the two combatants thanks to Shadow's Chaos Control.

"Destroy," Omega declared as he opened fire on the would-be overlord's defenseless form.

The flagship shuddered as it scraped a mountain peak.

Team Dark didn't have time to examine the smoldering wreck that used to be their opponent. The flagship was now too close to the ground for anything other than getting off as fast as possible.

"Treble! Plane!" Bass ordered as he disengaged his super adaptor. Treble quickly transformed from his armor mode to a small two-seater plane reminiscent of a fighter jet. Bass jumped in the front seat and motioned for Omega to get in the back. Shadow and Rouge took up perches on either wing and held on tight.

"Punch it!" Rouge yelled as they finished getting themselves set, and had to strain to keep her grip as the small craft accelerated like it was shot from a cannon.

Explosions rippled across the flying battleship's hull like a holiday fireworks display as the massive craft plowed into the ground at long last.

"You know, I could get used to this," Rouge grinned as the Treble Plane soared far enough away from the crashing craft to be safe from any flying debris, but also close enough for one heck of a view.

"Working together?" Shadow grinned back.

"We do make beautiful explosions together," Omega agreed.

"...Ah, what the heck," Bass caved in the moment. "That was some pretty epic ass-kicking we did back there. I'd be willing to do that again."

"Hey, Sally-girl?" Bunnie asked as the Freedom Fighters were returning home.

"Yes Bunnie?" Sally turned to give her friend her full attention.

"Well... Ah ain't meanin' ta pry or nuthin', but y'all seemed a little... scared a' Metal-hog."

Sally went silent at the claim, and remained that way for several moments.

"Actually," Rotor mused to himself, "now that I think about it, you seem to have been avoiding confrontations with Metal Sonic for a few Loops... Since NICOLE got bonded to you as an Intelligent Device in fact. You know anything about this 'Cole?"

The AI's holographic lynx avatar appeared before addressing the group. "I am afraid that it is a... rather personal matter that Sally has kindly asked me not to relate to others."

"We ahr understandink," Antoine smiled gently. "Princess... remembahr: We ahr your friends. When you ahr readee for speakink, we ahr readee for listenink."

"I know," Sally replied quietly. "And... you're right. I should talk about this. There's... there's just someone else I think should hear it first." (25)

"Okay, Sal," Sonic said as he closed the door to his room and motioned for Sally to sit on the bed, "we're alone. So what is it you needed to talk about?"

"It's... it's about Metal Sonic," Sally began hesitantly.

"And why you're so keen on avoiding him lately," Sonic finished, and scowled at the look of surprise Sally shot him. "Oh, come on! I'm not *that* ignorant of what's going on around me! This Loop is the first time you've let yourself be in the same place as him while Awake in a long time, and I'm pretty sure the fact that you'd have been facing him with a small army at your side while he'd be in a form that frankly looks and sounds *nothing* like himself was a big factor."

Sally blushed at the accusation, but nodded in affirmation.

"What..." Sonic sat down next to the ground squirrel princess and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "What did he do to you, Sal?"

"It..." Sally took a deep breath to steady herself. "It all started in a variant Loop you weren't Awake for. I never found out who the visiting Anchor was, might have been Blaze if the rumors about some island nation on the other side of the planet was true, but I was a little preoccupied with other matters..."

Sonic listened patiently to the tale Sally told him. Aside from the aforementioned rumors of an island nation, the place sounded a lot like that Astro Boy movie Tails had insisted he watch. Advanced city flying over a post-apocalyptic surface filled with junkyards of the city's discarded waste and overgrown ruins of former civilization.

Except in this story, Uncle Chuck was the brilliant scientist and Sonic himself was the young boy who was killed in an accident. The robot replica of Sonic that his uncle had built in his grief caused the tale to take an even darker turn when the robot proved to be malicious. Or, in layman's terms, in his efforts to try and replace/reincarnate Sonic, that version of Uncle Chuck had created Metal Sonic in all his evil robot glory.

"He starts... he starts taking everyone. One by one. They disappear and a robot version of them comes back on Metal Sonic's side instead. Until I'm the only one left. I ran as best as I could, tried to turn the fight back on him, but I got caught. He takes me into a room where there's already a robot version of me on a table hooked up to some machine and he straps me down to another table and hooks me into the other end of the device. All the while he's talking about how I'll see things his way soon. How I'll become his queen once I've been downloaded into a 'superior' robot body and my 'inferior flesh' disposed of. And I can't do anything but wonder if it's really going to be me in that body as he throws the switch, and then I wake up in Nanoha's Loop."

Sonic remained silent as Sally sobbed in his arms.

"And that's all I can think of whenever I see him. Him standing over me, telling me that I'll be his machine queen one I've shed my flesh and joined him. And then I have these dreams where we're all fighting together and then suddenly one of the others is a robot version of themselves turning on us. And then another and another until it's just you and me back to back and suddenly I hear *his* voice telling me what a glorious empire we have and I whip around to see it's not you anymore. It's him... reaching for me... tearing my skin away to show metal underneath..."

Sonic just sat there comforting the distraught princess for a while before speaking. "You know, I had something similar happen to me a long while back. I've already talked with Rock about it, you know, because he's gone through the whole evil robot doppelganger thing a few times himself, and I've been meaning to tell you about it as well, and it's kinda relevant and all, so..."

Sally sniffed, but made no move to stop Sonic from speaking.

"Anyway, there was this one Loop real early on, before Tails started even, where Metal Sonic kept trying to claim he was me from the future. That it was my destiny to become him. I'm my usual cocky self, yeah I admitted that, and I pound his face in a few times. He always gets away and survives to come back though, but I'm not real worried. I figure 'same old same old', right? Well after a few battles, he starts getting smart. Creepy smart. Like he knows what we're all going to do before we do it. And he starts picking everyone off one by one and roboticizing them. And me, I start going spare trying to figure out how he's always ten steps ahead of us. I throw everything at him, things I'd never even have considered trying before the Loops, but he still counters all of it. Then I start looking at all the friends I have left wondering if one of them is a traitor feeding him information. I stop talking with them and become even more of a loner than usual, but he *still* knows everything I'm about to do before I do it."

Sonic tried to suppress a shudder for Sally's sake, only to realize he'd closed his eyes when he feels her hand on his cheek and opens them to stare straight into hers.

"And then," Sonic sighed, "I was the only one left. I took the fight to him, determined to beat him once and for all or die trying, but Metal he... It was like he'd gotten a freaking script! It wasn't a fight to him, it was a dance recital! Before I know it, I'm stuck in a roboticizer attached to some massive doohickey. I'm thinking it looked real familiar when I realize it looks exactly like what Metal popped out of early on. And he starts telling me that the thing is a time machine. That he's not just going to roboticize me, but send me back in time to

become him in the first place. He even proves that he remembers my knowledge of the Loops despite not being Awake. He turns the thing on and I have just enough time before the roboticization process finishes to see myself arrive in the past."

Sonic let Sally hug him, and returned it a moment later. The two sat like that for a few minutes before either spoke.

"At first, I just pounded on Metal that much harder when we fought," Sonic picked his tale back up. "But after a while I started remembering dreams. Nightmares. Where I was just hanging around with everyone like usual when suddenly you all got shocked looks on your face and started attacking me. All of them ended when I finally caught a glimpse of my reflection and saw Metal's face instead of mine. Heck, I still have them from time to time."

"Thanks Sonic," Sally sniffed and wiped her eyes. "It's nice to know I'm not the only one who has nightmares about Metal and turning into a robot."

"Actually," Sonic patted the princess on the back, "when I talked to Rock he didn't think it was about Metal or turning into a robot at all."

"But–"

"No," Sonic interrupted her, "hear me out. Big Blue made a lot of sense when we talked about this and I think it applies to you too."

"...Okay," Sally said after a moment.

"Okay..." Sonic repeated and took a deep breath to collect his thoughts. "Rock... Rock's had more than his fair share of evil doubles too, including one that's supposedly him from the future, so I thought he'd have a good perspective on this. He's had a few nightmares too, or whatever the robot equivalent is, and he said something that really made me think. He said that what he was most afraid of was Dr. Wily taking away his Free Will. Of losing control of himself and being made to hurt those he cared for. And it hit me that that's what I

was afraid of too. Of Eggman finally getting his wish and making me one of his minions. It happened when we helped Rock get his place up and running. My super form got roboticized and if Rock was any less of a fighter, that would have been game right there."

"Is that why you had trouble sleeping afterwards?" Sally asked.

"Yeah," Sonic admitted. "I kept dreaming that I was their super weapon again and they were making me hurt everyone for them. Making me hurt my friends. Making me hurt you. And I know you well enough that what you're really scared of is the same thing. The loss of control. Being unable to stop yourself from doing terrible things. That sound right?"

"Yeah," Sally nodded solemnly. "I remember the baseline. When I was roboticized into Mecha Sally, or whatever he called me. I remember what he made me do. *All* of it. It was the worst thing that ever happened to me until that Loop with Metal. I... I just don't think I could take that again."

Sonic sat in silence for several moments.

"What if I said there was a way you didn't have to?"

"...How?" Sally looked curious.

"It's something Hermes noticed after we got back from Rock's place," the blue blur grinned. "He told me that all of us who went, even the non-loopers, got a minor glitch leftover in our code from when we were the Roboticized Masters. It's nothing dangerous mind you, but he felt I should know anyway. I was going to tell everyone when I spotted Tails playing around with it. Seems he'd found it on his own and was experimenting on what it could do so I figured I'd wait and do some experimenting on my own before I told everyone. And..."

Sonic concentrated for a few seconds and there was a flash of light from his body. When it died down, Sally felt her throat constrict and her eyes widen. Sonic had just turned into a robot...

Not like Metal Sonic. A sturdier design with wider legs.

Roboticized Master Sonic Man.

'Ohwalkersohwalkersohwalkersohwalkersohwalkersohwalkersohwalkersohwalkers...' her brain raced at the sight.

"Sal...?"

The voice stopped her panic attack even faster than it had begun. That wasn't the cold merciless voice of Metal Sonic. It wasn't the menacing synthetic sound of any of Eggman's creations. Heck, it didn't even have the threatening tone that the average Wily-bot used.

"Sal, it's still me in here," the mildly robotic voice of Sonic, the same voice she trusted with her life (sometimes against her better judgment), assured her.

"You... roboticized yourself?" Sally tried to get her mind back on track.

"Yeah," Sonic, or Sonic Man in this form, rubbed the back of his metal head a bit sheepishly. "Just finished getting it down this Loop even. Still, sorry for scaring you like that. But this isn't even the best part!"

"There's something better than turning yourself into a super robot with the power of both Eggman and Wily tech in one package?" Sally raised an eyebrow. She knew how Sonic got about his transformations.

"Yeah," Sonic Man's smirk was evident despite the Roboticozed Master form's lack of a mouth. "The best thing about being able to self-roboticize at will like this is..."

There was another flash of light.

"...you can also *de* -roboticize at will."

Sally looked up at the grinning flesh-and-blood Sonic and blinked a few times as that sunk in.

"De-roboticize...? At will...? You mean...?"

"Yeah," Sonic's grin softened. "If Robuttnik ever gets us again, we should be able to just... turn back. Of course, it may not work exactly as advertised, but–"

Sonic was cut off by a glomp and a rather fierce kiss.

"...I'd *love* to learn that," Sally said when she finally came up for air. "You will teach everyone else too, right?"

"Well, yeah!" Sonic almost looked insulted at the idea that he wouldn't.

"Good. I know Bunnie will like it," Sally told him. "As much as she's okay with being a cyborg and likes all of the perks that come with it, she still wants to have a honeymoon with Antoine where she has all of her original limbs."

"Ah, right," Sonic nodded, reminding himself that some Loops Bunnie's cybernetics were from partial roboticization instead of being prosthetics. "But that's for later. There's something else we should do first."

"Like what?" Sally asked, puzzled.

"Well," Sonic waggled his eyebrows, "we *are* in my bedroom."

Sally hit him with a pillow. (26)

"You think Doc Wily might really be a ninja?" Vector asked his chameleon friend.

"Well..." Espio hedged for a moment. "Assuming he is, he's either and exceptionally bad ninja or an exceptionally good ninja."

"...I don't get it, can't you tell when someone else is a ninja?" Vector scratched his head in confusion.

"Only if they are within a certain range of competence," Espio answered. "A range that Dr. Wily does not fall in. The ultimate goal of the true ninja, after obtaining the necessary skills to complete any mission, is to hide the fact that they *are* a ninja from all others. It is why; for all my expertise in martial arts, combat, stealth, and infiltration; I am merely a very good ninja. For everyone who knows me also knows that I am a ninja."

"But didn't Doc Wily pretty much admit to being one back there?" Vector still did not seem enlightened.

"Yes, which would make him an exceptionally bad ninja for revealing such without having achieved appropriate skill to back up the claim," Espio agreed. "However, I find myself disinclined to believe his claim, which would make him able to hide his ninja status even after revealing it. A feat that only an exceptionally good ninja could even hope to accomplish."

"Okay, seriously, what's up with you lately?" Bass posed to his... friend? Rival? Eh, friendly rival was close enough for government work he supposed. And Shadow was badass enough that he'd actually admit to that. "Ever since these 'Black Arms' idiots showed up, you've been acting weird. Like, *emo* weird. It's freaking me out to be honest, and I don't freak easy."

"It's..." Shadow was about to say it was none of the robot's business, but stopped himself. Sonic and the others had tried their best to talk him through this a few times, but they didn't really relate to him in the first place. Bass... did. They were both dark individuals who teetered on the line between hero and villain. If anyone could offer a valid perspective on this, it was the 'Black Prince'. "It's complicated. You know I was created fifty years ago by Professor Gerald, correct?"

"And you were friends with some girl named Maria that you never stop talking about," Bass folded his arms. "Tell me something new."

"Well, the leader of the Black Arms, Black Doom, claims I was made to be their vanguard. There's evidence that supports this, evidence showing that I was made partly with DNA from the Black Arms race. But there's also the fact that the project Gerald headed was to make a defensive weapon for GUN. And then there's Dr. Eggman who claims that I'm really a robot replica of the original Shadow that *he* made to serve *him* . I just... I don't know who to believe. Why was I made? What is my purpose?"

It was true. He hadn't looped into the newly restored baseline since he'd helped get Bass's native Loop up and running, instead only having Loops where the Black Arms either didn't exist or never made their way to Mobius. It was his 327th time encountering them and he was no closer to discovering the truth of his pre-Loop origins than when he started looping.

"You know," Bass began seriously, "only the fact that you're a kick-ass fighter, either as an opponent or an ally, is keeping me from laughing my steel-plated ass off at you right now."

"This is important!" Shadow growled at the robot. Treble began to growl back from his place at Bass's side.

"Since when?" Bass shot back as he waved Treble down. "Look, I've got enough biometric scanners installed that I can tell you Eggman is lying his rotund butt off, but the rest of it? Who the hell cares? You think I let the fact that Dr. Wily built me dictate my life? I've ended up fighting *against* him more often than I fight *for* him. So why the hell should you let GUN *or* Black Doom, or hell even Gerald, tell you how to live yours? Who *cares* who made you in the past? They don't get to tell you how to live your future. What does it matter where you came from next to where you go from here?"

Shadow blinked as he digested that. The way Bass put it, it all seemed so clear. What *did* it matter if he was made as Black Doom's

vanguard, GUN's weapon, or even if he'd actually been one of Eggman's robots? The ultimate choice... was his. It always had been. (27)

Shadow sighed. "I really have been acting like an idiot, haven't I?"

"Eh, we all have our off days," Bass shrugged. "Now, how about we get up to that comet and kick Black Doom's ass back across the cosmos?"

Shadow raised an eyebrow at the robot's assumption. "And what makes you think I won't decide to help them invade instead?"

"Maria," Bass deadpanned.

The dark hedgehog blinked and shrugged. It was a fair rap.

Shadow grit his teeth as he and Bass raced towards the center of the comet. The others were paralyzed by a chemical from the Black Arms and only his own biology, a defense apparently copied by Bass along with his Chaos powers, allowed him movement.

Black Doom had revealed his true intentions at last. To turn the world below and all who lived their... into a renewable food source. This was even worse than he'd feared from all the times where these events had been stopped or thrown off course before they reached this point.

And then Black Doom did something unexpected. Something he hadn't done in all the Loops prior. He wrested control of the Chaos Emeralds from where they hovered around Shadow and used their power to invoke Chaos Control.

The comet was transported to the planet surface where it began to pulse and grow protrusions, sending searching tendrils into the city and soon the rest of the world.

There. He'd found Black Doom. Waiting for him. Smug and assured in his victory.

Time to dissuade him of that notion.

Shadow groaned as he listened to the final message from Professor Gerald, one he'd waited untold Loops to hear. He hadn't expected Black Doom to be able to exert control over his body like that. Bass was being held nearby in an energy field, his ability to replicate Shadow's defenses against the Black Arms' paralysis having piqued Black Doom's interest.

Figuring out how to prevent this from happening to him again was now his top priority in the Loops. He *hated* feeling weak.

"Don't worry grandfather!" a female voice spoke up on the recording. Maria. "Shadow and I will protect this planet! Right Shadow?"

Screw it. Screw letting Black Doom walk all over him like a neophyte. Shadow gathered his will and power and forced himself to his feet.

"Well, well, well" Black Doom observed. "It seems you're immune to my mind control..."

"You have no control over me," Shadow began ominously. "I now know who I am. The past is behind me, and I am who I choose to be. And I choose to be the one who kicks you off this planet!"

Barking interrupted the exchange as Treble burst into the chamber. That... was one determined canine robot.

"Treble!" Bass called. "Super Adaptor!"

The fusion of robot warrior and canine burst the energy prison and the combined form landed on his feet.

"Don't forget about me!" Bass growled as he glared at Black Doom. "I'm taking my own pound of flesh out of your hide Black Doom!"

The two charged as one, only for Black Doom to flash away with Chaos Control.

"Have it your way," the voice of the alien overlord echoed around them. "So be it... Your past, present, and future ends... TODAY! Say goodbye as you witness my true wrath!"

"You gonna let him talk to us like that?" the dark robot warrior grinned at Shadow.

"No," the dark defender smirked back as he pulled the Chaos Emeralds down and drew on their power. Doom wanted to up the ante? Then Super Shadow and Super Bass would call his bluff.

'Devil Doom' was one ugly bugger, that was certain. About the only thing more dangerous than his appearance were his abilities. Massive chunks of city ripped from the streets, protective lasers, breath weapons that belonged in a giant monster movie, and two heads.

Pinning him down might have been hard solo, but with both Super Bass and himself blasting away, it wasn't looking good for the alien conqueror.

Super Shadow began gathering energy for one final Chaos Spear on one side of 'Devil Doom' while Super Bass did the same with his copied Chaos powers on the other side.

"CHAOS SPEAR!" they both yelled and two beams of energy lanced through both of 'Devil Doom's' eye sockets.

"Impossible!" Doom ranted as he lost the power of flight and plummeted to the ground below. There was more, but Super Shadow wasn't in a mood to listen. Maybe next time. He was more concerned

with focusing his Chaos Control properly to get the Black Comet off the planet and into the path of the ARK's Eclipse Cannon.

In a room high aboard a mechanized zeppelin high in the sky, a shadowed figure glared from behind his desk.

"They're done?" he asked.

"Yes," a female voice replied nervously. "I took the specs you drew up and improved our rides just like you asked. I even made a few improvements, but..."

"But...?" the voice repeated dangerously.

"But... how did you come up with these in the first place?!" the female blurted out. "One day you have absolutely no interest in the technology, heck you slept through my father's lessons on it, and the next you're handing me designs so far ahead of what we have that even I can barely make sense of them! It's just not *possible* !"

"Oh, but it is..." the grin in the voice was audible. "If you travel back in time."

"But..."

"Nothing comes back except for memories," the figure continued, ignoring the interruption. "Memories and some training. Memories of learning our origins, sure, but also memories of a rival. One who I've spent several lifetimes aiming to beat. A victory I'm dedicated enough to that I forced myself awake for every last lesson I could get out of you on how our technology works. Many times over. Until I could memorize the specs that you yourself would eventually create and bring them back with me. All to beat my rival."

"Wait..." the female interrupted again. "You... You know the truth about Babylon Garden?"

"Of course Wave," the figure brushed off her surprise. "All in time. But first... First I have a score to settle."

"Jet...?" the female named Wave voiced her concern.

The dark grin of Jet the Hawk was illuminated by a flash of lightning. "A score with Sonic the Hedgehog."

---

1) Shadow loves any excuse to use lines like this.

2) This Loop at least. It was kind of an off-and-on thing for them.

3) Of course, he'd have this reaction to the suggestion of Dr. Eggman in a relationship with anyone...

4) Well, light fire for Waltz. Borderline overkill for most anyone else.

5) Non-looping Amy tends to have something of a one-track mind.

6) Uh oh...

7) If you've played Sonic Heroes you can probably guess whose voice this is and what's being said.

8) And if he did that, Amy might head who knows where trying to find him and miss the upcoming fight.

9) No offense to Rouge, but I'm betting on the C4.

10) You didn't forget about that, did you?

11) He does. Mr. X in Megaman 6. It boggles the mind how he got that money though...

12) The dramatic reveal that you all probably saw coming a mile away!

13) What's really disturbing is that she meant it when she called him 'love'.

14) Super Ray comes from something I find rather interesting. In the comic baseline, Ray uses the Master Emerald to actually fake going super and scare off some attackers. It's something no one has done before or since to my knowledge, so props to the little guy.

15) Hey wait, she dropped the song name! Cue the music!

16) In case you were wondering if Dr. Wily could ever resist gloating, the answer seems to be 'no'.

17) Grabbing some popcorn to watch an epic battle for the fate of the world is a surprisingly common attitude among loopers.

18) Wait, what? My script clearly says 'Waltz gets her gargantuan steel-plated arse handed to her' right here. I even underlined it!

19) Whoops... A couple of the pages in my script got stuck together. False alarm folks!

20) Hey, wait a second Ray! You were supposed to have a 'congrats on going super' party! You don't want Pinkie to learn you skipped out on your own party, do you? Ray? Aw, nuts, he can't hear me on the other side of the fourth wall.

21) Yeah, Joe's Awake this Loop. Probably... Maybe...

22) All I can say about this line is that the inside of my head is a disturbing place.

23) Hey Wily! Jamaican Masters?

Wily: Why, yes, I did.

In order: Rastafari movement, Jamaican Bobsled team, Panto Mime, Sprinting, Cycling (aka the two sports Jamaicans have won Olympic medals in), Steelpan (aka the Steel Drum), Rugby (popular team

sport in Jamaica), and the national bird of Jamaica (the Doctor Bird, aka the Swallow-Tail Humming Bird)

24) You know, I always felt a little cheated that I didn't get to fight Neo Metal Sonic in the game.

25) Warning: Relating of traumatic Loops ahead.

26) I'm not saying they did. I'm also not saying they didn't.

27) Sometimes we just need a second opinion to see what's right in front of us.

28) What's this? Is Jet the Hawk looping? Stay tuned to find out!

Mega Loops 8

8. baked

"It's hot..." Roll moaned from her lounging spot on the sidewalk.

"Yeah..." Rock agreed with his sister.

"Really hot..." Roll added.

"Uh-huh..." Rock murmured.

"A hundred and eleventeen in the shade."

"That's not a real number."

"I know, but my external thermometer is fried from prolonged stress."

"Ah... I wonder what's causing it?"

"Bwahahahaha!" the voice of Dr. Wily suddenly blared from the televisions in a nearby electronics shop. "Citizens of Mega City! No doubt you have noticed my little heat wave project! If you ever want the weather to cool down again, you will turn over all government and administrative functions to me! You have... oh, until your brains all bake in the heat! BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Well... that explains that," Rock sighed.

"You did ask," Roll smirked slightly as the two of them got up to go thwart the mad scientist's latest scheme.

8.2 (Gamerex27)

The door to Maccadam's Oil House swung open. A small, blue mech walked in, shivering. He took a seat by the bar. "Something strong, please."

"Eeeyup," said the ancient mech tending the bar, grabbing a mug and filling it with some of the higher-grade Energon. He slid the mug across the table to the stranger, then reached for a second mug to give to the other, yellow mech at the bar.

Rock turned his head slightly, then nearly jumped out of his seat at the sight of yellow. "GAH!"

"AH!" Startled, Bumblebee fell off of his stool, slamming to the ground.

Taking a deep breath (even though Transformers didn't need to breath, it still held a calming effect for Rock), the Mega Mech noticed that the yellow robot next to him was *not* the horrible *thing* that had terrorized him in the last Loop.

"Ow..." Bumblebee climbed back onto his stool, wincing at the combined pain from the fall and the persistent sting still wracking his throat from where an Awake Ratchet had installed a new voice box yet again. "You feeling Loopy?"

"Yeah," Rock sighed. "Sorry about scaring you...It's just that, last Loop, I had bad experiences with the color yellow. I'll have to ask Dad if he can change the color of the Mega Buster's shots next time he's Awake."

"What happened?" The Autobot scout asked.

"I was making my way through another one of Wily's mazes," Rock replied, "when this... *thing* started chasing me. Shooting it didn't work: no matter what I did, it just kept eating everything I shot it with, from the Mega Buster to the Saw Blades to everything else. It cornered me off a cliff, and next thing I knew, I Woke up here on Axiom Nexus."

"What did it look like?"

"I don't think it was one of Wily's robots, actually," Rock said. "It was some floating organic ball. It freaked me out, really."

"Sounds like you ran into Pac Man." Bumblebee took a swig of his Energon. "You run into him again, you have to attack him from behind. Preferably if you're incorporeal at the time, since he can't fight back against ghosts."

"Thanks for the advice." Rock clinked his glass against Bumblebee's. "Since there doesn't seem to be any major fights in this Loop, I think I can finally take a breather. I need it, too," he said morosely, "after the horror movie I just went through."

8.3

"Wait..." the Flash said in response to the robot's claim. "You're seriously telling us that you were made by Dr. T. O. Morrow in order to infiltrate the Justice League? During your interview to join?"

"Yes," the crimson android replied.

"Why?" Green Lantern voiced the confused question on everyone's mind.

"Because my creator is a jerk," the android applicant stated calmly, "and I have no intention of even pretending to help him with his plans."

"Assuming we do believe you," Batman's eyes narrowed, "why should we let you join? What reason do we have to trust you after you've told us you were made to infiltrate our ranks?"

"None, really," the robot shrugged. "But I intend to continue helping people who need it to the best of my abilities, regardless if I am

allowed to join or not."

The core members of the Justice League excused themselves to deliberate on the matter for a few minutes before returning.

"Well," Superman stepped forward from the returning group, "while there are some concerns, we have decided to give you the benefit of the doubt." At this, the Man of Steel extended his hand towards the man made of steel (or rather a superior metal alloy) and shook the hand extended in return. "Welcome to the Justice League Proto Man."

8.4

"What are you working on, dad?" Roll asked her currently Awake father.

"I found this most intriguing piece of armor in my last Loop," Dr. Light replied as he continued examining what looked like a steel breastplate, except that it shimmered and seemed to partially vanish every so often like a yoku block. "A dimensional breastplate of science as I was informed. I've been trying to see if I can duplicate its properties on my own and create a full set of plate armor for myself."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with you taking Dr. Lalinde to the Renaissance festival next month, would it?" Roll folded her arms.

"...Maybe," Dr. Light gained a slight blush. "I've heard that she's been ordering some materials to make a period costume of her own and..."

"And you saw an opportunity to both dress to match and play around with a new toy," Roll shook her head, smiling. "Well, good luck dad."

8.5

Roll opened the door and blinked.

Nope, the man who called himself Reverend Dark, in full red and black preacher regalia no less, was still there.

"Have you embraced the glory that is robotic superiority?" he asked her, holding a book tightly between his hands. A quick scan revealed the embossed title to be Principia Robotica 2.0.

Roll slowly closed the door and attempted to process what had just happened. After a momentary diagnostic to make sure her sensory arrays were not malfunctioning, she opened the door again.

"Only by embracing their robotic masters can humanity be saved from itself," the man began again. "Heavenly sister, you and your robotic brothers and sisters must accept your place at the head of the cause and lead the foul dregs of humanity into glorious servitude!"

Roll stood motionlessly in silence, having absolutely no clue how to handle this as the man continued to preach his beliefs at her.

8.6

Roll spat out water from her systems as her brother tried to hide his laughter.

"What happened?" he finally managed to ask.

"What happened is that dad forgot to remove Tango's feline aversion to water before he added the marine setting," Roll huffed indignantly.

"Ouch," Rock winced.

"And honestly," Roll continued to gripe, "what in the world does Dr. Wily keep finding in the deep ocean anyway?"

"Dunno," Rock shrugged. "It's apparently important enough for him to go after himself, but not critical enough for him to built a set of robot masters for."

7.7.7 (continued) (Hubris Plus)

Pitchblende Part 2: Get Equipped

"R-Robo...?" Doctor Light whispered, leaning slightly closer to the screen displaying Rock's video feed. "It's been years... I thought I'd never..."

"What was that, Dr Light?" Roll's voice asked from a second screen. She was standing over Iceman's deactivated form and had just finished scanning him with her copy chip. "There must be some interference, I couldn't quite hear you."

"...Nothing, Roll," he answered, shaking himself away from the past. "Excellent work with Iceman, I'm sending you on to Fireman. His fuel lines weren't designed for subzero temperatures, so the Ice Slasher should disable him without too much trouble."

"Roger that, ready when you are."

Light triggered the teleporter and double checked that the beam had gone through before cutting the outgoing audio and shaking his head ruefully. He couldn't be prouder of his children for taking up this task, but he was still surprised by how easily they had gone from lab assistants to warriors. *All three of them,* he reminded himself as he turned back to Rock's screen to watch his sons shake hands.

"Dad, I think we're all set here," Rock's voice came through as he scanned Gutsman. "And I've got someone here who says he can

handle Elecman at the power plant. I think we can trust him."

"The Doc says he'll send you along as soon as you've reactivated your teleporter transponder," Rock said, lowering his hand from the side of his helmet.

"Teleporter transponder...? Oh! That thing!" Robo stated, and his eyes brightened for an instant as he carried out some internal process. "I've been trying to pick up satellite radio with it," he added sheepishly.

"Alright, I'm sure you can handle this, but can you do me a favor and not show off anything too crazy?" Rock asked. "I'll explain more later, but let's just say that Wily's a fast learner."

"Shouldn't be a problem, I haven't had the *time* for mad science." He patted the side of his duffel bag. "Gonna have to settle for a little bi-polar engineering."

"...Right," Megaman said after taking a moment to process that. "Well, good luck over there."

"Likewise. See you on the other side."

The pair vanished in twin beams of light.

"Come on, where are you?" Elecman growled as he flipped through the plant's security cameras. He didn't even know *who* was breaking in, all he'd gotten was a proximity alert before they'd vanished.

"You wouldn't have lost them if you'd deployed the robots I sent *like I ordered!* " Wily raged through the monitor, his gigantic face overshadowing the camera feeds. What was the point of reprogramming the most advanced robots in the world if they were going to second guess your every command? And people wondered why he felt the need to micromanage.

"I don't *need* them! I have absolute control of *every circuit* in this facility! They would have only gotten in my way!" Elecman shouted, apparently having inherited a few of his master's control issues. "I can handle Mega Man, or Mega Woman, or whoever it is!" It was at that moment that one of the floor panels slammed open.

"Have I ever mentioned that I love the way you guys always forget about maintenance tunnels?" Robo asked as he hurriedly lifted himself out of the hole, what appeared to be a dozen sharpened steel spikes with coils of wire wrapped around them hanging out of his bag like a quiver. "They're almost as good as over-sized air ducts or glowing weak points, and chock full of spare parts."

" *Atomic Robo?!* " Wily screeched. "Elecman, fry that obsolete pile of scrap!"

"My pleasure, Doctor!" The robot answered as he gathered power for a thunder beam as Robo hurled a spear into the ground between the two of them. When he released the attack the bolt of lightning found itself diverted and grounded. "Lightning rods?"

"Even managed to give them a positive charge," Robo admitted without modesty as he hoisted another spear. "Good luck hitting anything you're aiming for." He threw again, this time directly at his opponent.

"Ha! Speak for yourself," the Robot Master returned as he nimbly leaped aside, allowing the rod to embed itself in the console. "I'm the most agile of the Masters, an old hunk of junk like you will never even touch me!" He generated a few arcs of electricity, one of which was drawn to the lightning rod beside him.

The console promptly exploded.

"...Whoops."

Doctor Light was getting worried. Rock and Roll had returned to the lab after defeating Fireman and Cutman without too much trouble, but Robo was still at the power plant and the blackout that had occurred twenty minutes previous didn't bode well. Normally he'd just check in, but he'd realized too late that they hadn't exchanged encryption keys for the coms network.

Not that he was certain his wayward son would have consented. The bot certainly hadn't checked in since vanishing all those years ago.

So, he'd fallen back upon the old scientists' standby of explaining things while they waited.

"Robo was an early prototype. *Very* early," he emphasized as he paced before nodding to Rock. "I'm sure you noticed the differences in design."

"Bulkier," the lab assistant turned super fighting robot answered. "And you definitely skimped on the paint job."

"Ha, yes. Most of the standards of modern robotics hadn't even been *conceived of* when he was built. Steel frame and plate instead of the lighter composites since adopted. That much weight required heavy duty servos, which themselves necessitated an experimental power source which lent the 'Atomic' part of his name. Essentially the only thing that didn't get completely overhauled in later models was the work I did designing his AI, and even that was done before the invention of the IC Chip."

"So why have we never heard of him?" Roll asked, wanting to catch any other differences between his and Blues' back stories. Blues had been a prototype of the Master series, but it sounded like Robo had been the prototype for *all* of modern robotics, which would make him... older. Potentially *much* older.

"It... Never seemed like the right time," Light sighed in answer. "One day he was assisting me in the lab, much as you do, the next he was gone. I would have suspected theft if security footage hadn't shown

him walking out on his own. Honestly, I'd given up hope of his return some time ago, considered him my greatest failure." He fell back into his seat and turned to a screen displaying a freeze frame of Robo mid hand shake. "I'm glad to see I was wrong on both counts."

He paused in his story as the lights flickered, the lab switching back to the grid and shutting down the generators as power was restored. A moment later there was the familiar *'bwoo-wip!'* of teleportation and Robo stepped out of a grey beam of light, a few holes burnt in his shirt but seemingly no worse for wear. One hand held his bag, while the other cradled a red and gold cylinder connected by an eclectic group of cables to a black and crimson pack that appeared to be duct-taped to his back.

"Sorry about the wait," he apologized. "I *may* have broken the plant's control room, and decided I should stick around to get the backup running. Oh, and I wanted to finish this," he added, giving the cylinder a wave.

"Is that *Elecman?* " Roll asked, finally recognizing the source of the jerry-rigged equipment.

"Well, it *was* ," Robo answered, waving the cylinder and causing a few sparks to dance from the end. "Now it's a lightning gun." He took in the looks the other three were giving him, ranging from incredulous to aghast. "I, uh, saved the thinky parts?" He added, dropping the bag and rooting around in it for a moment before lifting out a plastic baggy of circuit boards and wires.

"We'll discuss this later," Doctor Light said, briefly pinching the bridge of his nose before taking the bag and hooking the IC Chip up to the computer. "With the data from Elecman I should be able to finish pinpointing Albert's base of operations."

" *Seriously* ," Rock whispered as the good doctor worked.

"Speaking as someone who's had to dredge a lake bed to find his legs," Robo answered, "he should be happy that I kept all the parts

on hand." He nudged the bag open to reveal Elecman's other three limbs and head rolling around inside.

"I know you're trying to be considerate," Roll said slowly. "But I'm not sure there's any context where a bag full of body parts *isn't* disturbing."

Robo raised a finger in protest, paused, and tapped it against his chin. "You *might* have a point there."

"No, *really?* "

"Ahem," Light cleared his throat as he approached the three. "I've located the base, but Albert's somehow jammed teleportation so you'll have to approach on foot. It's likely that he's fortified his position, more-so than any of the Masters managed."

"Don't worry, Doctor Light," Rock said brightly. "We won't let you down."

"I never expected you to," he answered fondly, clasping his son's shoulder briefly before the three turned to go. "Ah, Robo," he called haltingly, holding a blue and yellow device out as the robot turned to face him again. "This is the Magnet Beam. Rock and Roll have already acquired it via their Copy Chips, but since you don't have one... I thought it would be appropriate if you had the original."

"...Thank you," Robo answered after a moment, not quite sure how to read the situation.

"And, once you get back, I was hoping we could talk?"

"I... Of course. I'd be happy to." He took the Magnet Beam and clipped it to his belt before stepping back to stand with the others. "I'll see you when this is over. Let's rock 'n roll."

The Light twins groaned loudly while their father chuckled.

"You've, uh, probably heard that before, huh?"

"We never *stop* hearing it." Roll grumbled as the teleporter engaged.

8.8 (LordCirce)

Megamind Awoke with his hands deep in the innards of a robot. He paused, finished soldering together a cluster of circuits, then turned very slowly in place. Given his status as Villain-turned-Hero, he tended to replace Villains when he ended up in a new Loop.

'Let's see, large machines, skull motif, a couple of ray guns, definitely a villain's lair. Given the lack of dome, probably not an observatory, real or otherwise. Let's see, memories, memories.'

Megamind blinked as he remembered his newest creation. *'Hmm, given that it has been six Loops, and this is a variant. DC-expy two loops ago, carry the two, square root, then it is a... 86 percent chance he's awake.'*

"Minion!"

"Coming, sir!" A golden robot hurried through one of the large, imposing doors (likely leading to a gahloting chamber, or a hero-trapping room). The robot was fish themed, with a pair of small fins on either side of its head, and a pair of rather large, bulging eyes.

"Ah, good, Goldfishman. Code: Are you Awake?"

"Code: Yes I am, sir."

Megamind nodded, then paused. "Code: Are you Awake, in the Time sense?"

Goldfish Man, or, as he was known in another universe, Minion, sighed. "Code: I'm Awake in both senses, sir."

"Good. Now, I appear to be an evil, genius named Dr. Mind, seeking to cause mayhem and terror through my robot soldiers. Thus, I have designed you, Goldfish Man, with your..." Megamind paused as the memory came back to him, "Memory Buster." He frowned. "That isn't too cliche, is it?"

Minion shook his head. "No sir. Most heroes gain amnesia before ever fighting the boss. They certainly won't expect to forget what they are doing in the middle of the fight."

Megamind nodded. "Good, good. Now, I just have to finish the rest of the robots, starting with..." he spun around dramatically to point at the robot he had been working on, before letting out a shriek and jumping into the air, landing in Minion's arms. Lying on the table was the partially disassembled body of a robotic Metro Man. Megamind gathered himself, coughed embarrassedly, then slide out of Minion's arms. "Right, right, so, there's Metro Man and...," the rest of Megamind's memories filtered into place. "Oh no, no way. There is no way I am building a Tights Man. Tighten can just sit out this Loop." He took a deep breath, then shook his head. "Forget it. Come, Minion, we're going to go find Roxanne."

Roll smiled at the retreating back of her Unawake father, then turned to the Looper replacing her brother. "Well, usually, my brother is here, and his name is Rock, so..."

Roxanne Ritchie, known in this Loop as Rox, nodded. "Rox is pretty close, I can see how the, eh, humor of the Loops would swap me with him."

Roll nodded. "So, it is probably a little disconcerting, being a robot, but you'll get used to it."

Roxanne snorted, then quickly covered her mouth with her hand. "Sorry, sorry, but, after spending several loops as a goldfish in a gorilla suit, you learn to adapt to just about anything."

Roll raised an eyebrow. "Ok, you have to tell me that story."

(Me)

"Now," the visitor to their universe began as his assistant warmed up the projector, "the multiverse is a–"

"Um," Roll interrupted the blue alien mad scientist, "I've actually already had this talk. I've even given it."

"But..." Megamind's lower lip started trembling. "But my presentation! I worked on it for so long! Why, cruel multiverse? *Why* can I never be the one to welcome new loopers?!"

"There, there, sir," Minion, aka Goldfish Man, consoled his boss and best friend.

"...I'll still watch it if it's that important to you," Roll offered.

"It's just not the same..." Megamind moped.

7.13 (continued)

As Ichigo sat in a random bar nursing a drink, he reflected that the Loop had *not* gone as planned.

The games had never really shown how much destruction and death Dr. Wily's robot armies really caused, but with the way things had still gone to hell in a handbasket over the years with the man dead Ichigo couldn't help wondering how bad it got with the man alive.

Dr. Light's robot masters, and later those of other roboticists, had still gone berserk for no apparent reason whatsoever. And Ichigo had been a little disturbed with how... hollow-like their actions were. Mega Man had stepped forth like he was supposed to, plus some girl

robot called Mega Woman who hadn't been in the games (but Orihime had talked about how a girl counterpart was planned or something a few times, so maybe that was how things were supposed to go), but events just kept getting progressively worse.

It quickly got to the point that Ichigo had to admit his vacation plans were pretty much a write-off and he'd started investigating. He'd been really surprised when, the first time he'd gone out to investigate in reaper form, all of the robots had immediately targeted him. Dammit those shots had *hurt* and he'd been fully expecting them to pass right through his soul-form and taken more than a few before he started defending himself.

And then he cut a few down and got blindsided by the low-grade hollows that jumped out of the robot shells.

Hollow-possessed robots were nowhere near what he'd been expecting, and it made him wonder if Wily was supposed to have been possessed too. What was worse was this meant Orihime had been right again. How did she keep doing that?

"I told you Ichigo-kun: One Loop you're going to go and kill the obvious villain and learn that they weren't supossed to be the villain that Loop. I'm going to have to revoke your Omniscient Morality License now, so be good and hand it over."

Oh, great, now he was hearing her in his head.

"How was I supposed to know killing Dr. Wily would lead to this?" he grumbled into his mug.

"Ah," a male voice spoke up net to him, "I was wondering who was responsible for that."

"Who the hell are you?" Ichigo whipped around, blurting out the line on reflex, to come face to shadowed face with a hooded figure. A figure he could now sense reishi from. Powerful reishi. The blade hanging from the figure's belt clinched the impression. There was a

Soul Society this Loop and he'd just run afoul of the local reaper variants. Joy.

"Calm yourself, young man," the hooded man held up a hand placatingly. "I'm not here to accuse you of anything. I was just finishing my patrol when I overheard what you said. You are the one who killed the man known as Dr. Wily? And from the way you said it, you believed this would prevent the robot wars that have torn apart the world, correct?"

"..." Ichigo stared at the man for a moment before deciding it couldn't hurt. "Yeah, that's right."

"Interesting..." the reaper rubbed his barely-visible chin. "And indeed you were correct that he planned to use robots to take over the world. But what is even more interesting is that you knew this fact."

Ichigo snorted and turned back to his drink. This was becoming a waste of his ti–

"After all, I'd only just decided on that course of action," the man finished.

Ichigo's eyes widened and he turned back to the mystery reaper who was removing his hood to reveal the grinning face of Dr. Wily.

"I've been looking for you for a lo–"

Ichigo went reaper, drew his zanpakuto, and beheaded the man in one motion.

"–ng time. Hahahahaha!" the severed head continued as Ichigo noted the sparking machinery from both pieces and swore vehemently.

'A decoy! A f–'

Ichigo's thoughts were cut off when a massive reishi suppression field hit him hard enough to make him stumble.

'That's... That's impressive,' he couldn't help but think as he forced himself to stand up straight. *'That would have floored almost anyone from my baseline easy.'*

"Impressive, young man," Wily's voice boomed from outside, though it seemed that none of the living could hear it as Ichigo stumbled towards the door, fighting the suppression field with every step. "Most impressive. Much better than reapers of Soul Society fared. Not a one of them could even stand, much less try to face me."

Ichigo stepped out and scanned for where the voice was booming from as the people around him continued on, ignorant of what was happening.

"Sending the feeble-minded hollows to continue my work was a simple matter, even as I took advantage of the training they offered me and became a reaper myself. Rising through the ranks was a simple matter for one of my genius and devising my plan to nullify any opposition to my new goal of ruling both this world and the next was easy to come by, if tedious to put into place. But now it is time to take my place as lord and master of both worlds."

'There,' Ichigo spotted the man and began focusing to push through the suppression field so he could fight competently. *'There he is. Sitting smug in the sky over the city, drawing his zanpakuto and... Aw,* no *. Please tell me he hasn't alread–'*

"Reign over all, Dokuro-jō!" Dr. Wily cried. "BAN–"

'He has...'

"–KAI!"

The blade erupted with power and expanded into one of the most massive forms Ichigo had ever seen a zanpakuto take save for that one disturbing Loop where a variant of Emperor Palpatine had a bankai that was essentially the Death Star. That had not been a fun Loop.

The smoke from the release dissipated, revealing a city-sized floating fortress decorated with a proportionately massive skull on what Ichigo could only presume was the front entrance. And all those guns sticking out of the walls probably weren't for show either.

"You have got to be kidding me..." Ichigo moaned to himself. He'd stabilized what power he could force through the suppression field enough to fight, better than his baseline even, but it was still holding back a lot more of his strength than he wanted to admit to. And keeping himself from collapsing under it was taking enough concentration that he didn't want to risk anything non-baseline lest he split his attention too much.

And then the hordes of hollow-like robots, clearly made in Soul Society from what Ichigo could just barely sense, swarmed forth.

9.1

The assembled Robot Masters that served under Dr. Wily had gathered at the front entrance of Skull Fortress to stare in confusion at the door. However, as odd as the event was, there was a fairly good reason they were doing so.

knock-knock-knock

That reason being that someone was knocking, politely, on the main entryway.

This was odd for several reasons. For one, the defenses should have blown away any intruder before they ever got within a football field's length of the door. At the very least an alarm should have activated. The only ones they knew who could just walk up to Wily's fortress like that were themselves, who were all accounted for, and Wily himself, who would have been granted instant access were he not in prison until the scheduled breakout next month.

Anyone else... well, as much as Wily's warriors agreed that he was the rightful ruler of the planet, even they had to admit that any non-Wily forces that dared to approach would certainly be hostile. An all-out seige, where the doors would be violently blown open, would be the order of the day, not a polite knock.

knock-knock-knock

Of course there was Wily's 'son', Bass, but he never did anything politely.

"What the hell are you blown fuses standing around for?!"

Case in point.

"Well, Bass, sir..." Bubble Man began nervously, "we're trying to figure out what's causing the noise..."

"Have you tried, I don't know..." Bass growled as he got in the Robot Master's face, "OPENING THE DOOR?!"

"Y-y-ye... I mean n-n-n-n-no..." Bubble Man gulped as Wily's black prince continued to stare him down.

knock-knock-knock

"WELL WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU WAITING FOR?!" Bass roared and punted Bubble Man towards the controls as the rest of the Robot Masters edged away from the confrontation.

Bubble Man scrambled to right himself and pressed the open controls for the gate. The metal entrance clacked open and when the Robot Masters saw what was on the other side, they all had their weapons aimed and primed.

"Whoa, hey! Truce!" a pair of blue armored hands were held up in a peaceful gesture.

"Oh, it's just you," Bass grumbled. "What do you want Mega-twerp?"

Right outside the entrance to Skull Fortress was Mega Man. Right behind him were Mega Woman, Proto Man, plus the Light-made Robot Masters.

"Well," the Mega Man began much more calmly than anyone else probably could have managed under the situation, "since Wily's in prison for the time being, I realized you all were probably bored waiting around for whatever plan he has in the works. So... I got the idea to come here and challenge you..."

Weapons that had begun lowering in confusion were brought back up as Mega Man reached behind himself and brought out... a sphere made from hexagons and pentagons?

"...to a Soccer tournament."

Weapons were lowered again in outright bafflement as Wily's army tried to process this development. Well, all except one.

"YOU'RE ON!" Bass grinned eagerly.

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8. baked) It's hot... It's Texas-in-August hot...

8.2) Wokka, wokka, wokka, wok–No that wasn't your cue Fozzie...

8.3) Blues has replaced an android hero known as the Red Tornado.

8.4) There's this Random Loot generator that I showed other Loop writers a while back. It's become a bit of a thing.

8.5) ...Have you found Jesus Man? (Sorry, I couldn't resist)

8.6) Tango Marine.

7.7.7 continued) Yeah, Robo isn't used to dealing with AIs that aren't trying to kill him, so he's a little light on the social niceties and... Wait, where did 8.7 go?

8.8) Poor Megamind. He puts all that effort into his "Welcome to the Multiverse" speech and everyone he meets has already heard it.

7.13 continued) You see Ichigo? *This* is what happens when you blindly derail plots!

9.1) Huh? What is this doing here...? This belongs in Loopset 9...

Mega Sonic Part 3

Mega Sonic: Part 3

"This is a pretty nice party," Roll smiled as she looked around. The gang had finally managed to schedule the event to celebrate Ray achieving super mode and pretty much everyone was there. "Where did you say you got the supplies from again?"

"Someone you'll probably meet sooner or later," Tails casually sidestepped the question. (1) "Me, I'm more wondering what the Chaotix told Charmy since he's not looping."

"Simple," Mighty chuckled as he came up to the two. "We told him there would be cake. What's up?"

"Nothing much," Tails shrugged. "We had a side trip to the Sol dimension recently. Blaze says 'hi'."

"Cool," the armadillo strong man smiled. "And what about this 'self-roboticization' training I've heard about?"

"Oh, that," Tails rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "It turns out all of us who were turned into the Roboticized Masters, loopers and non-loopers alike, picked up a minor glitch in our Yggdrasil code, at least that's what Sonic said Hermes told him."

"We are *so* sorry about that," Roll apologized with the tone of someone who had done so before, and was fully intending to continue for as many times necessary.

"It's cool," Tails waved off the apology with Mighty nodding in agreement. "Anyway, it's not dangerous according to Hermes, but what seems to have happened is that our Roboticized Master forms are... tucked away inside ourselves. Kind of like the subspace pocket, except totally different."

"Meaning you have absolutely no clue," Mighty deadpanned.

"Not really," Tails rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. "But what it does mean is that if you focus on it just right, you can turn into your Roboticized Master form. And also turn back to normal the same way."

"Self de-roboticization?" Mighty's eyebrows went straight up. "That might be the handiest thing we've ever come across."

"Okay dad," Roll's voice interrupted the conversation as she spoke into her communicator, "I'll tell them."

"What was that?" Mighty asked.

"You remember leaving one of your old beat-up Extreme Gears where the 'ancient lost technology' would be found and brought in for study?" Roll asked.

"Yeah!" Tails smiled with excitement. "You mean...?"

"Dad's just finished testing the first few prototypes," Roll grinned back. "Light Labs Extreme Gear ships out to stores tomorrow. You all should be getting your own personalized ones in the mail at the same time."

"Yes!" Tails cheered. The baseline challenge run Aunt Sally had asked for meant no Extreme Gears until they came across one legitimately or a third Unawake party invented it. Admittedly arranging for Dr. Light to get ahold of one from Tails's subspace pocket was technically cheating, but the fox figured he could slide on the issue.

"No Loophole Abuse next time, Tails!" (2) Sally admonished the fox.

"Aw, give tha kid a break Sally-girl," Bunnie defended him. "After all, I seem ta recall ya whippin' out an Intelligent Device on little ol' Ixis

Naugus earlier this Loop."

"Indeed," Bunnie's husband agreed, "and one shuddairs to think on what you deed to zat Mammoth Mogul personne. Why, I am gettink ze shiverings just thinkink about eet!" (3)

"The actions *were* at odds with your declaration that this would be a 'baseline challenge run', Sally," NICOLE added.

"Alright, alright," Sally raised her hands in surrender, "point taken."

"You were pretty awesome Aunt Sally," Tails offered.

"Boss..." Storm hesitated as Jet grasped the large yellow gem. "Why are we stealing dis again?"

"Fool..." Jet sneered at his dimwitted, if loyal and strong, companion. "The Chaos Emerald is precisely what we need to lure out Sonic the Hedgehog."

"And we want to do dat... why?" Storm didn't seem to understand. No matter how many times Jet explained the concept of reliving periods of time, in any life, Storm never seemed to get it. At least Wave got it, even if she seemed resigned to the whole affair.

"Because," Jet decided to just cut to the chase, "he is the only one in the world that can rival my speed. And I will not rest until I am the undisputed champion."

He glared, causing Storm to flinch back, and then decided to throw his companions a bone.

"Besides, the Chaos Emeralds are needed to activate the Key to Babylon Garden."

Both of them looked up sharply at that. The Key to Babylon Garden was a translucent glowing cube that had been handed down through

the leadership of the Babylon Rogues for generations, but there was no indication that its power was anything more than a legend or that the object itself was more than a fancy paperweight.

"W-w-wait..." Wave stuttered in shock. "You mean..."

"We will challenge Sonic and his friends to race for the Emeralds," Jet told them. "I get the chance to defeat him and we gather what is necessary to unearth our heritage. I told you I'd done this before. Now... follow my lead."

With that, Jet turned his Extreme Gear towards the window and blasted out into the "City of the Future" known as Monopole.

Sonic grinned as he watched the familiar figures take off down the street on super-fast hover boards. "Tails?"

"They've got the emerald, as usual," the fox grinned and pulled his new Light Industries board, custom-made by the doctor himself no less, out of his subspace pocket.

"Then let's get 'em!" Knuckles grinned as he did the same.

"All units," the police band crackled from the earwig Sonic had decided to wear for this, "suspects are southbound on 45 riding what appear to be hoverboard model Extreme Gear."

"Roger that," an unexpected voice replied on the same frequency that made Sonic grin wider. "We are en route to intercept."

"Well," Sonic chuckled as he raced after the Babylon Rogues, "this just got a lot more interesting..."

"B-b-boss!" Storm yelled forward. "We got guys following us! And they have Extreme Gear too!"

"What?!" Wave seemed shocked. "How...?"

"It doesn't matter!" Jet insisted. "Stick to the plan!"

Sonic raced ahead of the police cars as Tails and Knuckles kept Wave and Storm occupied to challenge Jet directly. The two did a few quick test bumps to gauge the other's skill, and Jet grinned.

"Not bad," the green-feathered hawk taunted. "You learn just as fast as always."

Sonic blinked at the implications. "You've... done this before?"

"More than you could imagine," Jet grinned darkly. "And this time there will be no question of who is the fastest!"

"I've got the gray one in my sights," a voice came over the police band in Sonic's ear before he could process Jet's statement.

"And I the female," a feminine voice responded.

"Take them out," the voice from before ordered. "I've got the leader."

"Well," Sonic returned Jet's grin, "you picked a really bad time to do this."

"Boss!" the panicked yell of Storm rang out. "Help!"

"We're under att–" the voice of Wave cut off suddenly.

"You see," Sonic dug deeper as Jet turned back in shock at his comrades' cries, "you haven't met the Man yet." (4)

"The who...?" Jet expressed his confusion just in time for an energy bolt to hit his Extreme Gear and send him tumbling down the street.

Jet groaned and picked himself up off the street to look at who had dared attack him. Floating right before him was a blue armored human (5) on a red Extreme Gear with an arm that ended in a cannon pointed at him. As he watched, the figure jumped off of his Extreme Gear, which itself twisted and reformed into... a dog?

"What...?" Jet stared in confusion.

"Jet the Hawk," Sonic grinned as he dismounted his own Extreme Gear which seemed to just... vanish into thin air, "meet my 'big bro' Rock Light, the Mega Man. Rock, meet Jet the Hawk."

"Nice to know," Rock nodded as two more human figures arrived on Extreme Gears behind him. A yellow-armored female carrying Wave whose Gear turned into a cat and a red-armored male with shades carrying Storm whose Gear turned into some bizarre spherical bird. "Jet the Hawk, by the authority vested in me you are under arrest for theft, destruction of private property, and reckless endangerment. You have the right to remain silent..." (6)

Jet just tuned out the rest of the speech. This... this was the most humiliating thing that had ever happened to him.

"Mayor Dorado, this is highly irregular," the police chief huffed as the man in question continued to flash his high wattage grin.

"Ah, but it is absolute brilliance itself!" the mayor of Monopole gesticulated grandly. "Imagine: A race using the latest and greatest extreme sports invention in the history of the world! The ultimate grudge match to determine one thing: Who in the world deserves the title of 'fastest'! With the ultimate glory prize, the Chaos Emeralds themselves. And since the city is the current owner of the Yellow Emerald, I, Mayor Leonardo Dorado, am prepared to drop all charges and offer it to the Babylon Rogues as their entry fee if they agree to race for fame and glory in the name of our great city!"

"Indeed," Dr. Light nodded from nearby. "From what I can tell, there is no inherent malice in the actions of the Babylon Rogues. Merely a desire for competition and some misguided notions as to how one organizes such things."

The chief sighed heavily. "Very well, mayor, but understand that when election time comes around the people will be holding you responsible."

"And I fully intend that when they remember this, the first word they think of will be 'wow'!" the mayor continued grinning. (7)

Jet stared at the widely grinning human and considered the offer. Beside him, Wave and Storm looked utterly and completely confused. Jet couldn't really blame them. Something like this had never happened on any of his previous trips back through time.

"So... we agree to race on behalf of your city in a tournament event and you just... set us free and *let* us use the emerald as our entrance fee? ...Why?"

It just made absolutely no sense to him. What the heck did this guy get out of it?

"Because I saw the footage of your little high-speed chase before it was cut off and the only thing I can say is WOW!" the sheer energy from the exclamation made all three of the Babylon Rogues jump. "You three are amazing! Sensational! And people all over the world will want to come see *you* race! For glory! For fame! For the title of 'world's fastest'!"

"...Still not getting what's in it for you," Wave stated after a long moment to recover from the way the man had leaned into all of their personal spaces.

"All business, I see," the man straightened up. "I can respect that. You see, all these people coming in for a racing event as big as this

will be will be spending money on places to stay, food to eat, souvenirs to take home. Lots of money coming into the city means a big boon for our economy. And since this is an election year, that can only boost my chances of being re-elected as mayor. The boost will come whether you win or lose, technically, but with you agreeing to race on behalf of the city it will be a much bigger boost if you win."

"...Boss?" Storm was the first one to speak.

Jet sat and pondered the offer some more. It sounded like plenty of benefits on both sides if he did and no benefit at all if he didn't. Plus, if he played his cards right, he could still salvage his original plan.

"Okay," he said at last. "We choose the locations for each course, your people set the course itself, and you've got yourself a deal."

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the voice of Mayor L. Dorado boomed out across the city. "Announcing the EX World Grand Prix! Using the latest in extreme sports technology, the Extreme Gears, this is the ultimate race! Seven teams with three racers each will face off against each other in a series of extreme races for glory, fame, and the right to call themselves the 'world's fastest'!"

Sonic, along with Knuckles and Tails, blinked as the announcement continued. This... was different. Usually Eggman was making this announcement.

"Teams have one month to register themselves and their Extreme Gear as well as pay the entrance fee of one Chaos Emerald! It's going to be one wow of a time in this supreme winner-take-all event folks!"

"You sure, dad?" Rock blinked as Dr. Light handed him the Chaos Emerald he'd been studying for the past few weeks.

"Of course," Dr. Light smiled. "I know how little you, Roll, and Blues get to compete for fun. Go ahead, take it, and hopefully the fate of the world won't be on the line this time."

"Thanks dad!" Rock smiled as he accepted the gem.

"Funny," Bass raised his eyebrow as he accepted the gem from his father, "I thought you needed this for that Time Skimmer project you've been obsessed with lately."

"I thought I did," Dr. Wily's muffled voice emanated from under some sort of contraption that looked like he'd strapped a cockpit and a space-age engine to a metal box. "But I was inspired to a new power source last night which will make the Chaos Emerald superfluous. Feel free to use it as your entrance fee. And remember to crush your opponents under your heels boy!"

The last part faded as Bass exited the secret lab in the G.U.N. base, and ran straight into what would be an odd scene anywhere else.

"No, Omega," Rouge facepalmed, "you may *not* blow up the other racers." (8)

"Then I see no reason to enter," the destruction-oriented robot turned to walk away.

"Eh, we're only allowed three anyway," Shadow shrugged.

"My Chaos Emerald, my rules Amy," Sally put her foot down. She may not be able to keep Amy from following Sonic into this tournament, but she could keep an eye on the girl. Plus she was wondering how she matched up against other racers in an event like this. (9)

"Go Team Acorn!" Cream cheered as she hugged her new Extreme Gear.

"And... done!" Rotor exclaimed as he put the finishing touches on the Extreme Gear he'd been customizing. "That's it, we're ready."

"Think Sugah-hog will be surprised to see us there?" Bunnie smiled from her seat on her husband's lap off to the side.

"So..." the shadowed figure stated, "you want us to race for you in this grand prix, and are willing to spot us both the Chaos Emerald and the Extreme Gear, on the condition that we win you... what again?"

The chair the figure was addressing swiveled around to reveal Dr. Eggman, his fingers steepled menacingly.

"The treasure of Babylon Garden," the mad scientist spoke in a tone that brooked no failure. "Secure that for me and you three will be handsomely rewarded."

"No sweat," the shadowed figure grinned maliciously. "The Hooligans are on the job."

"Hey Sal!" Sonic grinned as he spotted the princess walking to a team locker room with her Gear, special made for her by Uncle Chuck in his current job at the new Knothole Tech (10). "Nice to see you here! You on Team Hottie or something?"

"I'm here with Amy and Cream under the flag of Team Acorn," Sally gave the hedgehog a bemused look.

"Ah, so ignore the crazy on one and wait about ten years or so on the other," Sonic nodded sagely. "You see Bunnie and the others? They've got some sweet rides with them for sure, just none as sweet as you."

Sally rolled her eyes. "You are *incorrigible* ."

"Well now," Rouge smirked as she and Shadow watched Bass get as close to making a hormonal fool of himself as either of them could imagine, "looks like our little black prince has his eyes on a golden princess."

"Bass is attracted to power and warrior skill," a calm voice from behind only failed in surprising both of them due to Rouge's bat hearing. Turning, they saw the mechanical brothers of Bass's apparent love interest watching the scene with bemusement. The one in red continued speaking. "And Roll has proven herself very capable time and again in her clashes against Bass's father, his creations, and Bass himself."

"I'm surprised you're taking this so well," Shadow observed.

"Oh," the brother in blue smiled serenely, "if Bass screws this up, we've got dibs on whatever's left of him after our sister gets through."

"Uh-oh," Rotor whispered as he ducked back around the corner he'd been about to turn. "Don't look now, but it looks like this race has some trouble brewing."

Exchanging glances, Bunnie and Antoine proceeded to glance around the corner as discreetly as possible.

"Sacre-bleu cheese!" Antoine whispered. "Ze Hooligans!"

"What are those three varmints up to?" Bunnie whispered back.

"Well, they have Extreme Gear, so..." Rotor left that hanging.

"So we should all be prepahred for some dirty racin' out on tha track," Bunnie nodded as she pulled back from spying on the three infamous mercenaries.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the voice of Mayor L. Dorado boomed out over the crowd. "Welcome to the first ever EX World Grand Prix!"

The resulting cheers were deafening.

"And now it's time to meet the racers! First up, riding the latest from Light Industries, is the supreme extreme adventuring team of Sonic the Hedgehog, Miles "Tails" Prower, and Knuckles the Echidna, TEAM SONIC!"

The crowd roared as the three rather famous adventurers strode to the starting line.

"And right behind them, also riding the latest from Light Industries and needing almost no introduction at all for saving the world several times over, are the heroic robot siblings: Mega Man! Mega Woman! and Proto Man!"

The explosion of noise grew deafening enough that the declaration of their team name, Team Light, was barely audible.

"But we're just getting started folks!" the mayor announced once the cheers had died down enough. "Racing for the Guardian Units of Nations with Gear from Mr. X Sporting Goods, are Shadow the Hedgehog! Rouge the Bat! and the Black Prince himself: Bass!"

The name of Team Dark was drowned out in a tumultuous outpouring similar to that which had greeted the Light siblings.

"And we're not even halfway through yet!" the mayor grinned brightly as he continued. "Riding on Gear from Knothole Tech, we have Antoine D'Coolette, Bunnie Rabbot, and Rotor Walrus, better known to the world as the FREEDOM FIGHTERS!"

The cheers for each individual had been of a level that, while excited, could still best be termed 'polite', but the team name was apparently much more well known as the crowd erupted with cheers

for the famous group that fought against oppressive conquerors of all kinds.

"And what competition these days would be complete without an all-female team determined to show the world that the ladies are just as good as the men?" the mayor asked the crowd. "Also riding Gear from Knothole Tech are Cream the Rabbit, Amy Rose, and Her Royal Highness: Princess Sally Acorn of Mobotropolis!"

It instantly became clear that even if the crowd had no clue about who the individual members were, the idea of genuine royalty racing in a sports competition was a big deal. The name of Team Acorn went almost unheard in the din.

"Ah, but it's not all wine and roses folks!" the mayor's words induced an anticipatory silence. "There's a few thorns in this lineup as well. For now we have the villains of this event, racing for Robotnik Corporate on Gear from their subsidiary Accelovice, we have Nack the Weasel, Bean the Dynamite, and Bark the Polar Bear, THE HOOLIGANS!"

The angry boos from the crowd were almost as loud as the previous cheers as the team of morally bankrupt mercenaries strode arrogantly towards the starting line.

"And last, but *certainly* not least, racing for our own fair city of Monopole on the Babylon Standard, and let me assure you folks, Babylon sets a high standard indeed, Jet the Hawk, Wave the Swallow, and Storm the Albatross. The one, the only, BABYLON ROGUES!"

Many hadn't heard of the Babylon Rogues until a short while ago, but the grand prix advertisements had been hyping just about everything, including the ancient and infamous band of treasure hunters. As such, the crowd was perhaps more excited to see them than they were anyone else who had so far been introduced.

"And now," the mayor's voice settled the crowd back into an anticipatory state, "without further ado, it's time to begin the first race! Racers! On your marks!"

The racers all took a stance, each and every one looking intent and focused.

"Get set..."

The racers began backing up a few feet before they broke into a run for the starting line in order to build up momentum before mounting their Extreme Gear. The trick in this stage was to get as close to the starting line at a full run as possible without crossing it before the starting signal and getting a penalty as a result.

"GO!"

Wave sauntered off the bridge and towards the arena, smirking to herself. The fox might be unnaturally good at customizing for an amateur, but with the little gift she'd left, there was no way th–

"I saw what you did there," the voice of her leader Jet jolted Wave out of her thoughts.

"Jet!" Wave gasped despite herself. He might still be mostly the same Jet she'd grown up with, but he was also different. And it was... a little disturbing at times. "I... I didn't see–"

"Remove it," Jet ordered her.

"...What?" Wave stepped back.

"Whatever you did to sabotage their Gear, remove it," Jet repeated, his gaze boring a hole through her. "We are here to prove ourselves the best. The true masters of the skies and the worthy heirs of Babylon. To even think of winning by sabotaging the competition is to admit otherwise, and I will not have it. Ever."

"B-but..." Wave faltered at the intensity of emotion behind his gaze. "Yes... Right away." (11)

Rouge cursed as yet another of Bean's bombs nearly caused her to crash. Even with the score penalties for excessive force (12), the behavior just wasn't abating all that much.

She certainly hoped that Omega never learned of this. The robot would be positively insufferable if he learned that anyone even partially got away with such behavior.

Nack fumed in the Hooligan's locker room. He didn't care that all the spectators pretty much hated his team. He didn't care about the multiple false starts he and his team had been charged with so far. Nor did he care about how many rules were being broken out on the track. (13)

No, what he cared about was that they kept getting caught and penalized for it! What was the point of cheating if you ended up worse off than before?

At this rate, the only way they'd win is if everyone else DNF'd. (14)

Hmm... that was certainly a thought. Now... how to convince Bean to go along with smaller explosives...

"Do ya see it?" Storm asked with worry.

Wave blinked as she spotted the device Storm had found on his Extreme Gear. The big dumb guy was right, that wasn't supposed to be there. "Yeah, I see it. Good job finding this Storm."

A quick check revealed similar devices on her and Jet's Gears as well. Huh. Looked like someone was looking to fix the race. Too bad for them that the Babylon Rogues weren't pushovers.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Mayor L. Dorado's voice boomed from the stadium set up in the desert ruins. "We now come to the last race of the first ever EX World Grand Prix, and it's a real nail-biter! Team Sonic is in the lead on points, but the Babylon Rogues and Team Light are right on their tails! And the other racers shouldn't be counted out yet! Only a handful of points separate all but the furthest behind from the leaders, and as we've all seen so far, anything can happen out there which means it's still anyone's race folks!"

Sally yelped as her Extreme Gear lurched suddenly and sent her tumbling, the same happening to almost all of the racers around her. All except a select few.

The smug taunting looks of Nack the Weasel and his team set her blood boiling. So she took some vicarious pleasure when those same looks were wiped off their faces as the Babylon Rogues failed to succumb to the sabotage.

Jet scowled as he examined what Wave had given him. He'd suspected her of performing the sabotage, only to learn that someone had tried to sabotage them as well. And if nothing else, he trusted Wave to be honest with him.

He stalked up to what was supposed to be the winner's podium, where the seven Chaos Emeralds rested, and grabbed the microphone.

"The results of this race must be thrown out," he proclaimed to a stunned crowd and held up the device for all to see, "due to sabotage."

The stadium went nuts for several minutes before he could continue.

"These devices were found and removed from my team's Extreme Gears, but apparently not from other teams'," he informed the crowd.

"A severe charge," the mayor's voice interjected. "An investigation will have to be launched and the race re-run at a later date."

Many groans were heard from the audience at that announcement. During this time, Wave came up and whispered something in Jet's ear.

"Not necessarily," Jet spoke up, causing confused silence. "I've been told that the damage to the Gears is minimal and superficial. Repairs can be made in about an hour or two. At which time we can run the race over. At a new location."

"A... new location?" the mayor expressed the confusion of everyone else.

"A little surprise track I've had planned since this started," Jet grinned and took out a glowing translucent cube and held it up. The Key to Babylon Garden. "Ladies and gentlemen," Jet announced as the Chaos Emeralds lifted up and began to circle around the cube Jet held over his head, "I give you the *true* final racecourse of the EX World Grand Prix!"

The emeralds glowed and shot rays of power into the Key to Babylon Garden which then shot a beam out into the desert. There was rumbling as the ground shook and the sand out in the distance exploded upwards as something rose out of it. As massive torrents of sand poured off the object, it was revealed as a huge ancient stone city that floated serenely in the air.

"I give you the ancient homeland of the Babylon Rogues! The race to determine the true masters of the skies and the fastest in the world shall be in *Babylon Garden* !"

The Light siblings had been upset that they hadn't managed to detect the sabotage devices on their transformed companions. However the damage had been superficial enough that all three had agreed to upgrade the foreign object detection and leave it at that.

But Bass? Bass was positively murderous over the fact that someone had hurt Treble. Heaven help whoever it was, because when he found them...

Nack was less put off by the latest development than one might think. Sure, it pretty much killed any chances the Hooligans had for winning the prix since there was just no time to sneak more of the mini-bombs onto the competitors' Gear, but that wasn't the ultimate goal. No, the goal was the Treasure of Babylon and the foolish hawk had practically handed it to the Hooligans on a silver platter.

All they needed to do was let whatever chump won open the way and then they'd swipe it and collect their payday from Eggman.

"You know," Sonic conversed with Rock as the latter performed the minor repairs to Rush, "I think that El Dorado guy has been rubbing off on Jet. It's funny, I really don't remember ever encountering him before... and I *know* I'd remember that personality of his."

"It's a little hard to forget," Rock chuckled.

"Ah, he's from your place?"

"Yep. He's usually the one who renames the place I live 'Mega City'."

"My sympathies," Sonic offered. "Seriously, watching the guy in action is enough to make *me* tired."

"What are you up to Jet?!" Wave practically yelled at her leader. "'To determine the true master of the skies'? Did you seriously just bet our heritage on a *race* ?!"

"Are you saying you don't think we can win?" Jet gazed at her calmly. "Are you saying we can't prove ourselves worthy?"

"No boss," Storm answered instead, "but... why do we gotta anyway?"

"Hmm..." Jet actually appeared to give the question consideration. "I suppose in some way I keep forgetting that the two of you never remember doing this. Maybe it's that I've uncovered the secrets of our heritage enough times that it's lost the sense of wonder you still have. Or maybe I've been spending too much time with that mayor. In any case, the idea of not taking it for granted, of *earning* our heritage in the arena of the skies against the only worthy opponents I've ever faced, just... appeals to me."

Both Storm and Wave stared at Jet as that hung in the air between them.

"But make no mistake," Jet smirked confidently, "I intend to win. And this time *nothing* is going to stop me."

The anticipation in the air could be cut with a knife. Cameras had been hastily set up and several companies that made large hovering pleasure craft had been contacted to rent quite a few to serve as makeshift bleachers for the aerial racetrack. The mayor had been increasing the tension by calling the mapped out course the 'Babylon Proving Grounds' and everyone present was going to be talking about the event for years to come regardless of the outcome.

But now preparations were done. The Extreme Gear had been repaired and the racers assembled. It was time to find out who would be crowned the 'World's fastest'.

The race was everything promised and then some. Near-wipeouts abounded in the high winds of the course and the racers themselves seemed out for blood at times. But in the end there could only be one winner.

As the finish line approached, the three jockeying for first were Sonic, Jet, and Rock. Not far behind them the main pack was jostling for position, and it seemed that Wave and Storm were trying to break out from the group.

Sonic and Rock exchanged a glance and grinned. They might be competing, but nothing in the rules said they couldn't gang up on another racer. They adjusted to come up alongside Jet, timed the perfect moment, and made to slam the leader of the Babylon Rogues from either side...

And Jet chose that precise moment to boost forward, allowing his opponents to slam into each other. The lateness of impact threw off both blue heroes' balances and they lost control, falling back and tumbling off their boards right in front of the main pack. Wave and Storm jumped high over the wipeout which proceeded to then take out half of the main pack.

A few managed to escape disaster, but not with enough speed to challenge the Babylon Rogues as all three crossed the finish line to cheers that shook the heavens.

"Ow..." Sonic grunted as he finally crossed the finish line, just behind Rock and just good enough for last place. He hadn't felt this boneheaded over a mistake in... a long time.

"Yeah," Rock laughed, none of his good humor lost despite losing, "that was some wipeout, eh?"

"Definitely," Sonic chuckled back. "It might even make my top ten."

Jet had been in something of a daze since he crossed that finish line and the adrenaline wore off enough for the realization to sink in.

He'd done it. He'd won.

He'd finally beaten Sonic the Hedgehog in a race. No tricks. No cheats. No excuses. Heck, even the advanced Gear specs he'd memorized had more or less broken even with whoever ran this 'Light Industries' place he hadn't heard of in previous trips back. In the end, it had all come down to a single moment where his superior skill had finally shone through.

He still couldn't quite believe it. But here he was, striding confidently to the Gates of Babylon with the Key firmly in hand. Shortly, he would use the Key to open the Gates and reclaim the heritage of his ancestors, for once... *for once* ... an honor that he'd *earned* rather than been granted out of misplaced pity.

Talking the mayor into holding the victory ceremonies at the gates to the inner sanctum of Babylon Garden earlier had been simple. Pretty much the only thing the man hadn't budged on was assigning cameras to follow them inside so the unveiling of the Treasure of Babylon would be visible to all present.

Though Jet hadn't fought all that hard against the concession. After all, it also meant that everyone would see him trounce the Guardian of Babylon on his Extreme Gear, a feat that Sonic the Hedgehog normally accomplished instead. Combined with no sign of that inept wanna-be Eggman and Jet was chalking this up to the best day he'd had in several lifetimes.

Nack and the Hooligans watched patiently from the back of the crowd as the Babylon Rogues opened the Gate to Babylon Garden's inner sanctum. A quick use of some personal cloaking devices, rather expensive ones at that, and the Hooligans followed them silently in. Now all that was needed was to wait for the Babylon Chumps to take out any defenses and they could make off with the treasure.

Rock was taking some good-natured ribbing from Roll, complete with a poorly-hidden smirk from Blues, when the roar sounded from

inside the gates. Whipping their heads towards the live display of the interior as many spectators shrieked in alarm, all three saw what looked like some massive genie monster appear out of nowhere, his lower body disappearing into some giant floating bottle.

As they watched, the entity roared at the Babylon Rogues once more and the gates began to close. That was all the prompting the Light siblings needed to call their animal support units to transform back into Extreme Gear mode and race inside.

Jet stared back at the guardian confidently even as Wave and Storm backed away in fear. Sometimes the guardian spoke, sometimes it didn't, and sometimes it was supposed to but the systems that allowed it had degraded over time. In any case, he'd seen Angelus, the guardian, defeated enough times that he knew exactly what to do. Heck, he was prepared to do it faster than Sonic the Hedgehog ever ha–

A trio of energy shots struck Angelus's bottle, shattering the mobile holographic generator that produced the guardian's image and hid away the Treasure of Babylon.

"Are you all okay?" the blue one, the one Sonic had called Mega Man, asked.

"Yeah," Wave looked relieved to have been rescued, as did Storm.

"That..." Jet tried to keep his fury down. He really did. "That was the Guardian of Babylon! The final test of worthiness for those who seek the Treasure of Babylon! Our final challenge to reclaim our heritage!" *'And they took it out in seconds!'* Jet fumed. *'Even Sonic the Hedgehog never did it that fast!'*

"Oh..." Mega Man and the yellow-armored girl, Mega Woman, at least had the decency to look apologetic.

"You should have said something," the red one, Proto Man, stated calmly.

"Yeah," the blue one apologized sincerely. "If we knew it was just a test we'd have never–"

Bang

The one known as Mega Man jerked as electricity arced over his form.

Bang

The one called Proto Man was next, a sparking hole appearing in his armor halfway through turning around, as Mega Man fell to the floor with blank eyes.

Bang

The one known as Mega Woman blocked the shot with a *broom* of all things, only for the electric arcs to render her immobile. The whole situation was so surreal that Jet was just now looking towards the source.

There. The inept racing team known as the Hooligans, with their leader Nack holding a long-barreled gun with a sophisticated-looking aiming device attached to the top. A weapon known to many as a sniper rifle.

"Hmph," the weasel snorted as he took aim again at the now paralyzed female. "Not bad. But not good enough."

Bang

The yellow crystal on Mega Woman's helmet shattered with vigorous sparks as she went down.

"Now," Nack the Weasel, known in some circles as Fang the Sniper, pointed the gun at the Babylon Rogues, "if you three would be so

kind as to hand over the Treasure of Babylon, we'll be on our way." (15)

The crowd had gone quiet as the events on the giant screen sunk in. But one in particular was taking it worse than anyone else.

Dr. Light's heart had stopped as he saw his children, estranged and not, gunned down with what he was certain were specially designed anti-robot bullets. His analytical mind, even in shock, could recognize the combination of an armor-piercing projectile which then unleashed a power surge internally to devastate mechanical systems.

'They should be alive,' he tried desperately to convince himself. *'You made certain their IC chips had the best surge protection you could devise.'*

He knew the specs. He'd designed them himself. It was just... they'd never had to prove themselves in conditions so critical. He simply couldn't be sure they were enough.

Jet had been furious at the interlopers who interrupted his moment of glory, yes. But they were warriors, regardless if they were made of metal or not, and what was more they genuinely didn't know what they had interceded in. But these... these... these three didn't even deserve the lofty title of *thieves* .

Yes, he had been furious. Now? Now he was so far beyond fury that he'd lapped back into total calm. To either side of him he saw Wave and Storm waiting for his decision and repressed a proud smirk. They had come face-to-face with the holographic guardian, been rescued by noble (if misguided) warriors, had those same saviors mercilessly cut down in front of them, and their lives threatened by the attacker. And they still listened to *him* first.

Loyalty that pure was worth a million treasures, even to an ancient band of treasure hunting pirates like them.

"You want the Treasure of Babylon?" he repeated with all the ominous calm found in the eye of the storm.

"If you don't mind," the backstabber asked with feigned politeness.

"Very well," Jet closed his eyes and prepared himself. "Wave? Open the chest and retrieve the treasure."

Wave blinked in shock and looked into his eyes before responding. "Of course Jet."

To his credit, Storm was silent as Wave, betraying nothing, not even what she'd seen in Jet's eyes, opened the treasure chest and retrieved the sole object within. To the casual observer it appeared to be a rolled-up rug or small carpet, mostly blue in color but trimmed with gold and some red as well as a few other vibrant colors.

Jet held out his hand and a moment later, Wave had placed the item within it.

"Now hand it over," Nack made a 'gimme' gesture with his hand as he kept the gun trained on the Rogues, "nice and easy."

"Sure," Jet smirked, getting a confused look from all three Hooligans at the confidence in his expression. "Catch."

The Treasure of Babylon sailed into the air as Jet threw it to the Hooligans, unrolling as it went and blocking their view.

"Ooo... shiny!" Bean pounced on Nack's hat to admire the object, further obscuring the sniper's vision as Jet began to gather thrust in his Extreme Gear.

Before the Hooligans knew what was happening, Jet had burst forward, instantly accelerating to maximum as he twisted a path around the mercenaries, created a vortex of wind, and vanished from sight.

"Did you really think to command the wind?" the voice of Jet seemed to come from nowhere, causing Nack and Bark to look around in confusion while Bean was distracted by the unfurled carpet that was the Treasure of Babylon whipping around in the sudden twister. "To steal from the sky?"

"Where are you?" Nack demanded as he tried to search for the hawk.

"Here!" Jet yelled from above as he boosted straight down the middle of the three, causing a burst of wind that scattered them like leaves.

As the Hooligans tumbled across the floor, Wave caught the treasure and calmly rolled it up again. Storm, it seemed, had caught something else.

"Boss, what should I do wit dis?" the albatross asked as he held up the sniper rifle Nack had previously been holding.

"Dispose of it," Jet ordered as he saw what his muscled friend held.

"Right away, boss!" Storm smiled as he clenched his fist hard. A moment later and the sound of protesting metal could be heard as the weapon was rendered completely useless.

"Wha–!" Nack yelled as he watched his weapon turned to twisted scrap. "Do... do you have any idea how much that cost me?!"

"Be glad it's not your neck..." a weak voice struggled out, and all present turned to see Proto Man force himself to his knees and aim his arm cannon at Nack. "If your little trick bullets had actually killed my brother or sister I would have returned the favor right now."

"Then they're...?" Wave asked with some audible relief.

"Alive," Proto Man confirmed. "Nack missed vital systems on my brother and our helmets are thicker than the rest of our armor, and

Nack hit the thickest spot on my sister's. They'll need repairs, but they'll be fine. As for you," Proto Man addressed the Hooligans.

"I suggest you leave while we're feeling charitable," Jet finished, the towering form of Storm pounding a fist into his palm behind him suggested what would happen if they ignored the offer.

"Hooligans..." Nack growled out. "Retreat."

Jet and the others watched as the three sped off towards the opening gates.

Nack and the other Hooligans sped out of the gates, and immediately ground to a halt as they almost crashed into a shimmering forcefield. Behind it were a slew of robots mounted on Extreme Gear and aiming weapons at them. Most appeared to be a variety of the Joe series, all currently with arm cannons trained on the Hooligans, but three were clearly different.

The one apparently generating the forcefield looked like a buff human with blue arms and legs, yellow gloves, cyan boots, and a giant red V-shaped torso armor that hid all but his eyes and had a stylized lightning bolt on it. The one in the back had blue armor with green boots, gloves, and helmet as well as a soot-black face where only the eyes could be seen. The one in front, and apparently the leader of the trio, looked like someone had crossbred a fishman and a scuba diver. He had green and yellow armor with pink trim, particularly on the knees and flipper feet, with a blue air tank connected to his helmet (which oddly had a yellow mohawk attachment on it) and in his hands held a trident that vibrated ominously. (16)

Behind them was a gathering of the world's heroes, those that just so happened to comprise the other racing teams, which just flat out looked pissed. (17)

"Nack the Weasel, Bean the Dynamite, Bark the Polar Bear," the aquatic robot declared, "the security forces of MeteoTech hired for this event do hereby place you under arrest."

"Bombs just want to be free!" Bean yelled cheerfully as he flung a spread of explosives at the robots, which proceeded to detonate harmlessly on the forcefield.

"Run for it!" the voice of Nack yelled as the smoke from the explosions obscured their forms. A moment later and the three could be seen tearing away from Babylon Garden as fast as their Extreme Gear could carry them, Bean being carried by Bark while apparently calmly holding his wrists out to be cuffed.

"Wait, if Roll agreed to be your girlfriend, then why have I never seen the two of you dating?"

*"*sigh* Because she told me that she didn't want to start dating until I could remember after Awakening."*

"Um..."

"And while I don't know what the weird inflection on that word is supposed to mean, I do know that it's more than just coming out of a rest cycle." (18)

Rouge shook her head of the thoughts as Team Dark closed in on their quarry. The award ceremonies had been halted while Dr. Light attended to his robot children. Unwilling to risk teleporting them in their condition despite knowing full well how safe his own technology was, repair supplies had been transported in so he could work on-site. And yet aside from Team Dark, the attending crowd hadn't thinned. If anything, the mass of concerned onlookers had been increasing when they left.

"Found them," Shadow's words drew the rest of the team's attention to the sight below where the Hooligans were ditching their Extreme

Gear and boarding Nack's double-sidecar hoverbike the Marvelous Queen.

"Thanks," Bass told them. "Just remember, no help unless I give the signal. These guys are *mine* ."

Rouge and Shadow nodded, even though they planned to give help from behind the scenes anyway. Shadow by making sure the Hooligans never received any reinforcements that might come to aid them and Rouge with a darling little undervalued technique from the Pokemon branch known as Disable.

Surprisingly, Roll needed the least amount of repairs. Aside from the mess that was the front of her helmet, she had suffered nothing more serious than a blown fuse. A quick replacement with a fresh component and she was as good as new, if minus her helmet.

Rock on the other hand had some fairly extensive internal damage to his body. Nothing that couldn't be fixed in time, but it would be a while before he was back to peak operational condition. For now though, Light's youngest son was insisting that he be present for the award ceremony and the presentation of the Treasure of Babylon even if he had to be carried.

The treasure itself almost seemed lackluster given the trials and protections placed around it, but Dr. Light noticed something about it even before the Babylon Rogues unrolled the item so the crowd could see it in its entirety.

"My word!" the scientist exclaimed from his front-row seat next to his younger children (19). "Is that material what I think it is?"

"Good eye old man," Wave gave the doctor a look that betrayed how impressed she was. "It is indeed the same kind of material used to make Extreme Gears."

The crowd began murmuring as the information worked its way around, and everyone's attention was riveted when Jet brought out the translucent cube known as the Key to Babylon Garden and held it over what to most looked like an ornate throw rug or small carpet for a moment before both began to glow.

And then the item rose off the ground slowly to hover in the air as the fabric rippled in the wind. By the end of the day most of the world knew two things for certain: The Treasure of Babylon was a prototype of the Extreme Gear which was even now taking the extreme sports world by storm, and it was a genuine-for-reals legendary *flying carpet* .

Nack swore when his precious ride was shot by energy blasts from a black-armored individual. One he knew as Bass, Dr. Wily's black prince, followed by that robotic wolf of his.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" the mercenary weasel yelled as he drew a pistol and aimed it at the robot. "No one shoots up my bike like that!"

click

Nack blinked and tried to fire again without success as Bass strode forward without any concern whatsoever. "Bean!"

"Gotcha boss!" Bean saluted and dove for the robot, producing several bombs that... failed to light their fuses. "Huh? What's wrong with you guys? Are you si–"

Nack gulped a bit as not only did Bean's explosives fail to ignite, but the nutty duck was casually backhanded into a nearby rock and fell unconscious. Bark tried to rush the robot only to be pounced on by the robo-wolf who pinned Nack's silent muscle to the ground and looked a single command away from ripping the polar bear's throat out.

"Look," Nack fished for something to get him out of this situation, "that whole thing on the track was just business you know? Nothing personal."

"You hurt my dog," Bass growled as he grabbed the weasel by his jacket and hoisted him face-to-face, just as Nack remembered that the robo-wolf had the ability to transform and that the robot's Extreme Gear had the same coloration as the metal animal.

"A s-simple misunderstanding!" Nack sweated nervously.

"And then..." Bass's grip tightened, "you shot my *girlfriend* . In the *head* . So don't you *dare* tell me it's not *personal* ..."

As the robot's other arm began to morph into a weapon, Nack wondered what his chances of living through the next five seconds were.

Jet whistled to himself as he strolled down to his office aboard the Babylon Rogues' zeppelin. He might have won the competition, but the mayor guy had pulled him aside to discuss making the whole EX World Grand Prix an annual thing. And... the idea actually appealed to Jet in a way that it never had when Eggman was running the show. But for now, he wanted to sit at his desk and bask in the glory of the new trophy sitting in a case by the wall.

"Hey Jet," a familiar voice interrupted the moment the leader of the Babylon Rogues entered. "Got a moment to talk?"

Jet turned to see Sonic leaning calmly against the wall of his office like he belonged there. After a moment of surprise, he decided to humor the hedgehog. "About what?"

"Back in Monopole, before Rock nabbed you, you said you'd done this before," Sonic replied casually. "How many times?"

"More than you can imagine," Jet sneered.

"Dude," Sonic laughed, "you couldn't write numbers that big using the walls and teeny handwriting. Seriously, how many?"

"..." Jet had lost count early on, but he reluctantly admitted his best guess.

Sonic nodded thoughtfully. "That would pretty much make you the sixth Crash Generation looper from our universe."

"The *what* ?" Jet blinked in total confusion.

Dr. Wily smiled to himself as he finished flight preparations for the Time Skimmer. As far as G.U.N. knew, the device could only be used to view events in the past or most likely future. And for the most part, that was correct. However, one could physically land in another time period provided they had enough energy to both deliberately choose their destination and make the return trip as well.

For this test, he'd set the dial to, oh, about two hundred years in the future. He wanted to see what the world looked like a good amount of time after he gained control of it. If he was lucky, maybe he could visit the history museums and see the records of his eventual glorious victory.

Smiling in a way that betrayed nothing to the G.U.N. techs observing the test, not to mention the brass funding this and other projects of his, Dr. Wily pulled a lever and activated the time jump.

"So..." Jet, now in his seat behind his desk, took a moment to digest the lengthy explanation his rival had given him, "not only are you 'looping' as you put it, but you've been doing it much longer than I have."

"Pretty much," Sonic confirmed.

"I see... How much were you holding back?" Jet accused.

"Not as much as you're thinking," Sonic shrugged. "Honestly, I just used Gear recently developed by Rock's dad instead of the special models that I save for competitions between loopers. As for skill, I promise you I brought my best game. I tried holding back against a version of you who wasn't Awake once and it wasn't pretty."

"Good," Jet growled. "I *despise* charity from my competition."

Sonic just waved off his rival's comment. "Anyway, since you're looping you'll want to practice this."

Jet blinked as Sonic pulled small handbook out of nowhere and handed it to him. Taking it automatically, Jet noticed the two-tailed fox friend of Sonic's... Tails... on the cover and the title... "Subspace Pockets and You?"

"It's a really useful technique," Sonic assured him. "One you'll want to learn as soon as possible and practice with regularly. The book goes into some detail, but essentially it's a way to keep your stuff from one Loop to the next."

Jet pondered that for a moment.

"Oh, and once you get that down, let me know and I'll show you the Ping," Sonic added. "So you can let others know when you're Awake and stuff."

"And why would I want to let you know *that* ?" Jet smirked at his rival.

"What?" Sonic chuckled. "And miss the next time members from the Looper Racing Circuit are in a Loop together?"

"The who?" Jet was beginning to feel a bit out of his depth at the rapid-fire of new information.

"Basically a bunch of speedsters and serious racers from across the multiverse who like to get together and challenge each other to

races," Sonic explained. "Aside from me and a few others from our branch, the LRC has Rainbow Dash, the Flash, Quicksilver, Lightning McQueen, Speed Racer (no, seriously, that's his real name), Kamen Rider OOO: aka Hino Eiji, Fate Testarossa, Blurr, Cheetara, Dash Parr, Captain Falcon–"

"Whoa, whoa!" Jet interrupted. "You can't seriously expect me to believe that all of these people are top notch racers! I haven't even *heard* of any of them!"

"Dude," Sonic gave Jet a tolerant look, "we're talking about a gathering of racers from multiple realities where 'grand champion' and 'fastest in the world' are almost entry requirements."

"And you're asking me to join?" Jet repeated as that sunk in.

"Jet," Sonic shook his head. "Aside from the Hooligans and your teammates that grand prix was pretty much an entire *field* of loopers whose experience was equal to or greater than your own."

Jet leaned back in his chair and pondered that for a bit. "Who's the current champion?"

"The racing champion of the multiverse?" Sonic grinned with approval that Jet was aiming straight for the top, just like he always had. "Right now that would be Herbie."

"And who is Herbie?" Jet asked.

Sonic considered the question for a minute. "Nah, not ruining the surprise. I'll make you a deal though: You buy the picture that someone's guaranteed to take of your face when you find out and let me see it and I'll show you the one they took of mine. Oh, and you might want to keep this date in mind!"

Jet accepted a calendar page for what looked like next year with a circled date on it. "And this is...?"

"It's when Tails predicted the last of those Arks of the Cosmos will fall to Mobius," Sonic reminded Jet. "Those things are always a lot of fun. Plus... there's something I'd like to try with them if you're willing."

"Like what?" Jet eyed his rival suspiciously.

"...I'll give you a choice," Sonic offered. "I can tell you right now, or you can meet me next year with your Ark and race for it."

Jet didn't even have to think about his response.

Silver the Hedgehog floated along with his telekinetic powers over the ruined city on his usual patrol and pondered the state of the world. As he did so, his thoughts went as they often did to an old man...

"Whatcha building?" a young Silver asked the old man.

"I am building a robot," a grayed wild-haired partially bald man with intense eyes and a large mustache snorted in annoyance. "Go away."

"Everyone says you're here to save us from the Flames," the young hedgehog ignored the dismissal.

"They are much more appreciative of my talents than most," the man continued to work without looking at the youth. "I am currently building a force capable of combating these 'Flames'."

"Why?" the young Silver asked. "Everyone else just wants to run and hide while it burns away everything else."

"Because this world is mine," the man hissed vehemently. "Mine by right of being the most brilliant, the most talented, and the most capable! And I will not permit some mindless flame beast to deny me that right! My latest creation will be able to easily trounce even the most terrifying of lava monsters that this... 'Iblis' creates!"

"Will he really be that strong?" Silver questioned curiously.

"Of course he will!" the old man seemed insulted. "I have spent my life fighting against misguided 'heroes' who would deny me my rightful place. Heroes who would trounce this 'Iblis' in an instant! And I have studied all of their powers and abilities. The analytical mind and calm demeanor of the Mega Man. The ruthless physical prowess and melee skill of the Mega Woman. The military scanners and hardware of the Proto Man. And the combat programming of my own son... Along with a support unit of his own that can withstand the harshness of these molten fiends and a few surprises of my own invention, he shall be invincible!"

"Wow..." Silver's eyes shone with the interest of youth. "What's his name gonna be?"

"I shall call him... Quint."

"Silver!" the familiar voice shook the psychic hedgehog out of his memories. On the roof of a nearby building stood the robot he'd just been thinking about. Clad in the green and lime armor he was built with, blue shades hiding his face, a yellow 'V' crest on his helmet and the crimson red battle jackhammer Sakugarne flung over his back. Beside him stood the purple-furred feline pyrokinetic known as Blaze who had mysteriously appeared a few weeks back. (20)

"What's wrong?" Silver called back to his friends.

"He's appeared again!" Blaze informed him and Silver felt his anger spike.

Iblis. Quint was indeed everything that the old man had promised, but Iblis was immortal. He could never die for good. But that never stopped Silver and his friends from trying.

"Sun of Soleanna, guide and watch over us with your eternal light..."

As her words echoed across the gathered crowd, Princess Elise touched the torch to the pedestal, causing flames to race along the ornate centerpiece of the city as fireworks were released into the air.

"This has been an entertaining celebration," Rock observed from his spot on a nearby rooftop. "Thanks for inviting me."

"Yeah, this is a pretty sweet shindig every time," Sonic agreed from his perch next to the blue bomber. "Right up until Eggman crashes it seeking the 'Flames of Disaster'."

"Speaking of which..." Rock interrupted as scanned the skies, spotting several incoming missiles headed for the general area.

"Yep," Sonic smiled. "That's our cue."

With that, the two blue heroes jumped into action liked they'd agreed on. They would both intercept the missiles and then Rock would take on Eggman's robots while Sonic got Elise as far away as possible.

Bass snorted as the explosions behind himself and Shadow died down. Eggman's defenders were just plain weak.

The communication watch on Shadow's wrist crackled to life. "Transmission from HQ. There's an SOS coming from Dr. Eggman's Base. Our last communication with the infiltrating agent was 26 hours ago. We expect an immediate rescue, Agents Shadow and Bass."

Then again, as Shadow placed a hand on his armor and prepared to Chaos Control them both inside the outer walls, Bass had to admit that the whole 'agent' title had a nice ring to it.

Blaze readied herself along with a still Unawake Silver and this Quint fellow she'd never met before as the massive lava beast Iblis rose out of the ever-hot lava at the base of the destroyed city. With her

experience in the Loops, she could seal the monster herself now, but...

Well, she was curious as to how the presence of Quint altered things. She'd keep the solo-seal option open in case he and Silver weren't able to manage things with just her baseline abilities as backup. (21)

"I still can't believe you two were sent in after me," Rouge huffed from the backseat. It didn't matter how many times it happened in the Loops, the whole thing still rankled her.

"Why?" Bass grinned as he opened fire on the surrounding robots from the aptly named 'shotgun' seat while Shadow both drove and fired missiles from the armored jeep the three had appropriated. "Embarrassed to be seen with us?"

"No," Rouge grumbled. "It's just that this was supposed to be a *stealthy* mission."

Sighing, the spy/thief pulled a ominously glowing object out from behind her.

"Speaking of the mission, don't either of you want to know what this is?" she asked. Shadow already knew about Mephiles's prison from multiple encounters with it in the Loops, but Bass's reaction could prove interesting.

"Can it blast Eggman's sentries to smoldering scrap metal?" the black-armored robot asked.

"Probably not," Rouge wondered why she'd expected anything more sophisticated than that.

"Then I couldn't care less," the super robot snorted as more of Eggman's robots, one a giant dog, landed in front of them. "Oh, look. They're trying to keep us from getting in."

"More fools them," Shadow grinned as he gunned the accelerator.

The massive form of Iblis was beaten, again. It was not the first time Quint had defeated the beast, and he was fully certain it would not be the last. For as many times as he, and then Silver and now Blaze, had defeated the monster, it simply rose back up from the ashes once more.

"How can we completely destroy Iblis?!" Silver punched a broken pillar.

Quint silently observed Silver's anger. It was something he shared. But the knowledge of how to destroy Iblis for good had been lo–

"By knowing the truth of course," a new voice interrupted them. Turning, all three beheld a black hedgehog atop a pillar that no longer held up anything above it. "Just as a flower comes from a seed or a chicken from an egg, everything has an origin."

Quint noted the instant distrust that sprouted on Blaze's face, but paid it no immediate heed. Many would feel the same way about his creator after all. (22)

"You need to find the being originally responsible for this catastrophe," the mysterious hedgehog continued.

"And who is that?" Quint challenged. "And how can such knowledge aid us?"

Bass screwed up his face as Rouge gave the rundown on this Soleanna place that apparently featured prominently in Eggman's recent plans. It wasn't a backwater by any stretch of the imagination, but it also wasn't really at the forefront of anything.

As much of an idiot as Eggman could be at times, he was still almost as smart as Bass's dad. If he was interested in the place, then there

was a reason for it.

And why did he keep getting the feeling that the glowing ornate *thing* Rouge had swiped was watching him?

"To rewrite your future, the past must be changed. You must eliminate the individuals who awakened Iblis. You must destroy the Iblis triggers."

Quint shook his head free of Mephiles's instructions as he activated his sensors and looked around. So this was the past... Before Iblis was set loose to destroy everything. A time when his own creator was alive and his ambitions not yet drowned by the sea of flames the future would become. And while he was no longer certain that his creator's ambitions were well founded, it remained that any future would be better than the one that currently existed.

Off to his side, Quint saw Silver shaking off the effects of Mephiles's time travel and smiled slightly. The hedgehog had grown up to be a mighty warrior, a valued ally, and a trusted friend.

Silver turned his gaze on Quint and for a moment, he seemed not to recognize his oldest friend. But the moment passed as the hedgehog's eyes lit with understanding and Quint chalked it up to a mild and temporary side effect from the journey. (23)

"Come Silver," he spoke, idly noting that Blaze had failed to appear in the same location the two of them had, "it is time that we fight to change the future. So that all may indeed have a future."

It was time to locate the Iblis triggers and ensure that they never freed the monster.

Blaze sighed to herself as she examined the world of Sonic's time. Mephiles had separated her from everyone else as usual, likely

because he could sense that she'd act as a voice of reason and counter his manipulations.

Dealing with Silver's baseline insecurity if he wasn't Awake would be bad enough. But the apparently ruthless nature of Quint? With a clear target? That was a recipe for disaster.

"Damn..." Rock swore as he watched Dr. Eggman fly away with Elise, even though the princess had tossed them the Chaos Emerald she'd come to possess.

"Eh, don't feel too bad," Sonic consoled the robot Anchor. "Eggman tends to be pretty determined about getting his mitts on information and the people who have it. In fact, I think we blew my old record out of the water for keeping her away from him before he managed to distract us enough. At least when I'm not using out-of-Loop powers. Besides, if he doesn't get Elise he tends to blow the city up trying."

"That really doesn't make me feel better," Rock replied. "We need to get her back."

"And we will," the blue blur assured him. "And she'll be fine when we do. The girl may not look it, but she's a tough one. But first it's time to do the detective thing, chase ol' Egg-face down and find out what he's up to. And since you're visiting, you wanna take point?"

"...Sure."

When Rock had sent out a distress signal that Soleanna was under attack by Dr. Eggman, his brother and sister had contacted the Freedom Fighters and responded as quickly as possible.

Of course, trying to meet up with him and Sonic amidst the chaos of the city was proving problematic and the group had split up. At the moment Roll was paired up with Amy (having been a hair slow on

calling a partner and not simply taking off on her own like Blues) when the pink hedgehog let out a cry of joy.

"Sonic!" she tore off towards a hedgehog that, even in this light, Roll could tell was definitely not Sonic. The figure next to him though was unmistakable.

Quint. Of course, she hadn't yet met the future clone of her brother this Loop, which left the question of how to play this. Considering Amy hugging the strange hedgehog, she decided that if it was working for her...

"Rock?" she approached the two with a look of confusion on her face. "What are you doing in that get up?"

Amy chose that moment to realize that she wasn't really hugging Sonic, Roll idly recognizing Silver, and slapped the poor guy.

"Our apologies," Quint stated politely, "but I fear we're not the ones you seek. I am known as Quint, and this is Silver."

"Sorry," Roll apologized as well, "but even with the shades you look remarkably like my brother. We're trying to find him and his friend."

"We too are searching for someone," Quint added.

"Then we'll help you!" Amy promised instantly, grabbing Silver's hand and Roll suppressed a chuckle at the look on the hedgehog's face. Awake or not, it was clear he wasn't used to female attention.

Taking a moment to send an alert to Blues and the Freedom Fighters, Roll decided to follow the three and make sure they didn't get into too much trouble.

"Sonic!" Elise exclaimed as the blue hedgehog from before crashed into her cell, followed by a two-tailed fox and the blue robot. "Mega Man!"

"Please, call me Rock," the robot hero smiled.

"You came to rescue me!" the girl exclaimed with relief and rushed forward to hug the two blue figures.

"Well, of course," Sonic grinned. "We always keep our word!"

"Look out!" the fox yelped, pointing to a large dog-like machine outside the cell in which rode Dr. Eggman.

"Well, well, it looks like I have a little pest control problem," the mad doctor sneered at the heroes. "Leave now! The princess is mine until I unlock the secret to the Flames of Disaster!"

"Yeah, not happening!" Mega Ma–Rock stepped in front and defiantly leveled his arm cannon at the war machine.

"It would appear," Quint observed drily as Amy Rose continued to drag Silver through the desert sand in search of her supposed boyfriend, "that your friend's idea of aiding our search is to conscript us in aiding with hers."

"Yeah, she takes a little getting used to," Roll admitted.

"Out of curiosity," the robot from the future inquired, "how long did it take you?"

"Any day now..." Roll laughed weakly and rubbed the back of her head.

Quint was silent for a moment before snorting in amusement.

Bass wasn't really paying attention to the history lesson Rouge insisted on giving as the three strolled through the castle ruins. Oh, he was recording every word, but it was all boring junk about some failed energy project that blew up in people's faces called–

"The Solaris project," the sudden voice of Dr. Eggman cut into his thoughts. "An ambitious undertaking named after the eternal sun god they worshiped."

"Well," Bass observed as he took in the doctor's latest personal battlecraft. "This just got interesting."

"Indeed," Eggman replied calmly. "Bass, Rouge, Shadow. As much as I'd love to catch up on old times, I'm on something of a schedule. So if you would kindly return the Scepter of Darkness you stole from me."

With a grin and a slight motion of his head, a number of Eggman's robots dropped down to surround the group.

"Sure thing, doc," Bass grinned as he swiped the thing from a surprised Rouge. "Hope you've got enough super glue."

"NO!" Eggman yelled as he grasped what the anti-hero intended to do just in time for the device to crack and shatter in Bass's grip.

A dark energy burst forth, causing all of Eggman's robots to fail and making Bass grimace as it tried to do the same to him. He hadn't felt anything that sinister since his dad played with the dark energy he'd extracted from the alien robot that Duo guy had called Slur. It had been one heck of a power boost when he'd had it, but it had given him this niggling phantom pain that he liked to equate to heartburn in humans.

Then some massive shadow... *thing* ... leapt out of the ground, making Eggman take off in a panic like Hell itself was after him. Then it went after the robots, passing through Bass last and leaving a cold sensation that made him wonder if some denizen of Hell had actually been unleashed. It ended by striking Shadow's... shadow, maker Bass hoped that wasn't going to end up a pun, which then rose up to form an off-colored clone of Bass's friendly rival.

"Oh, how ironic fate can be!" the thing laughed without displaying any evidence of a mouth on the faux-Shadow form. "I would never have believed I would be released through the actions of the Slur-touched or that I would revive through *your* shade! I thank you Bass Wily, Shadow The Hedgehog!"

"...The hell are you?" Bass grunted as the figure gave a mocking bow.

"I am Mephiles," the figure rose up slowly and began to stride forward at a slow, ominous pace. "Mephiles the Dark. What, did you forget me? I owe much to you the two of you. Oh yes." A malevolent purple energy orb formed in the figure's hand. "What you gave to me, I now return to you! A one-way ticket to oblivion!"

The orb expanded suddenly, encompassing all four of them before any could react and the next thing Bass knew he, Rouge, and Shadow were in a crumbling ruin overlooking an equally crumbling city.

Elise smiled as she ran alongside her rescuers into town. The two were so amazing in her eyes, and it sounded like they had equally amazing friends, like the fox who had led *that man's* forces away to help her escape.

Her heroes. Rock.

"As long as you're happy, that's enough for us."

And Sonic.

"Nothing starts until you take action. Don't waste time worrying that you could use doing."

Yes... She would do her best to be happy. For them. And she would do everything she could to prevent Solaris from becoming the Flames of Disaster again.

Silver was still trying to take everything in. The odd Quint individual he remembered from this lifetime's childhood, the strange old man who had built Quint that Silver now knew to have been Dr. Wily, the presence of Mega Woman in the Loop... He just wasn't sure how it would play out.

"Amy! Roll!" a voice rang out. "How've y'all been!"

And now it looked like the Freedom Fighters had come along for the ride this time around, as evidenced by the waving Bunnie Rabbot and Antoine that Amy and Mega Woman were rushing to join. No, Silver wasn't sure how events were going to play out, and messing with things blindly could end in disaster. Plus he still hadn't located Sonic or the second 'Iblis trigger' this Loop that he strongly suspected was Mega Man.

'Hmm... I wonder how Quint and I would fare against the two of them...' Silver wondered. As fortune would have it, he spotted the two with Princess Elise at that precise moment. *'Looks like I'll get to find out.'*

Whispering for Quint so that Amy and her friends wouldn't overhear, Silver motioned his friend towards the blue duo.

Sonic blinked as two figures appeared in his and Rock's path. Silver and a green armored robot with blue shades and a large red object slung over his back... that Quint guy from Rock's neck of the multiverse. The one Waltz had offed that Loop when they'd met in the Wily Egg.

"It's them," Quint stated. "The Iblis triggers."

Sonic noticed Silver giving him the 'play along' signal discreetly and made a similar motion to Rock.

"What are you goofballs on about?" he pretended to have no idea what was going on. "Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter," Silver stated as Quint hefted the red object, apparently the pogo stick from hell, in front of him threateningly.

"For the good of the future," the green robot intoned as his weapon cracked the ground from the almost casual motion, "you two must be destroyed."

Elise watched on as her heroes fought against the sudden challengers. The power being thrown about was immense. While Sonic and Rock fought with speed and arm cannon respectively, the strange hedgehog rapidly threw around furniture, boxes and debris with his mind and his green-armored partner unleashed energy blasts and physical blows from his odd transforming weapon that blew craters in the street and buildings alike. The surrounding area was quickly being torn to pieces as surely lethal blows missed their targets.

She was still trying to figure out what she could do to help when metal arms grabbed her from behind.

Quint had to admit that the cry of someone in distress had distracted him, and in that moment the Iblis triggers had tried to escape.

He growled and silently ordered Sakugarne to link with his arm and activate its power cannon mode. "Don't turn your back on–"

Clang! *Boom!*

Quint grunted as his weapon was knocked off course by a powerful strike from what appeared to be a broom. The signature, and highly effective, weapon of Roll Light, the Mega Woman.

"Don't you *dare* try and kill my brother!" the yellow-armored girl robot snarled at him.

"Y'all heard the lady!" the voice of the cybernetic rabbit he'd seen Roll greet before joined the confrontation. Her mechanical arm was morphed into an energy cannon and the male coyote stood beside her in a clear combat stance with sword drawn.

"You were after Sonic and Mega Man?!" Amy yelled incredulously at him and Silver. "Were you seriously going to kill them?!"

"They are responsible for destroying the world," Quint glared back at them.

"Eez zis some kind of joke?" the coyote scoffed. "Zose two are ze last in ze world who would do such a think!"

"Believe what you will," Quint told them as he hacked into the teleportation network of this time and laid a hand on Silver's shoulder. "But in the near future the actions of those two will unleash global devastation!"

And with those parting words, Quint teleported himself and Silver away from the confrontation.

"Geez," Sonic huffed after he and Rock left the fight. "Is Quint always that intense? That pogo stick of his is rough stuff..." And don't think he hadn't noticed the smug grin on Silver's face. Oh, he was going to have *words* with that guy later.

"More or less," Rock breathed heavily to circulate more cooling air over his internal systems. "Though Sakugarne doesn't normally have a pile-driver/boxing-glove mode. Or a super cannon mode for that matter." (24)

"So just the massive pogo-jumps that make the ground explode when he lands," Sonic snarked. "Yeah, that's much better."

"Could be worse," Rock noted. "He could have had the beam saber upgrade."

"Ugh, I can do *without* another round of Darth Time Traveler..."

"There you two are," Blaze accused as she finally caught up with Silver and Quint. "I've been looking all over for you..."

"Blaze...?" Silver asked with a convincingly solemn tone. Heck, Blaze's only clue that it was an act was the pre-arranged hand signal they had telling her he was Awake and not wanting to rock the course of events too much. "To kill in order to save the world... Is it the right thing to do?"

"Right or wrong matters little," Quint answered before Blaze could. "If we do nothing, then nothing will change."

Blaze joined Silver in looking at Quint with surprise. Ruthless the sentiment might have been, but there was wisdom in it. Much the same wisdom Blaze recalled imparting to Silver herself. (25)

"Regardless, the situation is more complex than we've been told," Quint continued. "The Iblis triggers are in pursuit of a 'Dr. Eggman' who has a base nearby which may contain further information."

Two teams had been assembled to recover Elise. The Freedom Fighters, Blues, and Roll were off sabotaging the doctor's base while Sonic, Rock, Tails, and Knuckles fought their way in from the front.

Rock had no idea what was up with Eggman most days. First he said he'd 'let' them hold onto the Chaos Emerald and now he was suddenly demanding they turn it over in exchange for Elise? Did the guy even know what he was trying to do?

"You're late," the voice of Eggman sneered as the four heroes entered the inner chamber of the base.

"We have the Emerald," Rock glared as he held up the gem. "Now let Elise go!"

"All in due time," Eggman grinned triumphantly as a pedestal rose up from the floor. "Place the emerald there."

Rock glared at the man and, knowing full well that he had something planned, did as instructed. Even though he could see Elise shaking her head, silently begging him not to.

"Always nice to work with a professional," Eggman grinned as the pedestal retracted, taking the emerald with it. "Allow me to introduce you to the Solaris prototype."

Elise's gasp as the chamber activated was audible even over the hum of the sudden energy field that encompassed the heroes. After a few moments of fruitlessly trying to break free, the four were lifted off their feet as the field intensified.

"With this machine, I will be able to control the flow of time itself!" the voice of Eggman was the last thing they heard before they all vanished.

The trio of Quint, Blaze, and Silver all stared up at the robotic sentry that had descended to engage them. It was, in essence, a floating weapons platform with glowing hover engines that could be repositioned for precision movement, four 'arms' that appeared able to be positioned parallel or perpendicular to the ground and housed a large number of missile silos and machine guns in addition to possessing heavy armor, a pulsing crystal that Quint's sit-rep scanners showed was both the reactor as well as a powerful laser, and atop a rotating sensory platform. The transponder identified it as an 'Egg Genesis'.

"Silver," Quint spoke as the machine began targeting them, "'Death From Above'."

A moment later, Quint and Sakugarne were wrapped in Silver's psychokinetic power and flung high into the air above the machine while Silver himself and Blaze took on the dangerous task of drawing its fire.

When he was directly over the behemoth, Quint set one foot on Sakugarne's foothold and another between the handlebars. It wasn't the most stable position, but it was a bit more aerodynamic and allowed Quint to aim as well as shoot down any incoming fire without throwing his targeting off too much. And one more reason...

"Sakugarne, engage downward thrusters," Quint ordered as he finished linking his feet to their footholds and his support unit complied, its handlebars becoming jets normally used for its jet adaptor mode, and began to rocket downwards far faster than gravity could possibly pull it. The 'pogo-stick from hell' as some called it tore through the armor of the war machine like a steel nail through warm butter and burst out the bottom in a spray of crystal shards from the destroyed laser weapon and finished by cratering the ground in an eruption of powdery snow.

The war machine gave a protesting groan as its systems failed and it began to crash to the ground. The first legs to impact snapped off after a moment of protest, and the direction of the crash was changed from straight down to an angle that came nowhere close to hitting the robot beneath it.

Silver and Blaze came rushing up to check on Quint as the snow settled to find the robot casually brushing snow off of his armor. As the two slowed to a more sedate pace upon seeing that their friend was fine, Silver spotted an object in the snow. A blue crystal cut into a pristine faceted polygon.

"Hmm...? What's this?" Silver puzzled over it, and Quint scanned the object.

"Energy readings indicate it to be one of the lost Chaos Emeralds," the robot proclaimed.

"Yes," Blaze nodded. "Gems of immense power that respond to thought and emotion. It is said that if you gather all seven, a miracle will occur."

Quint turned pointedly to the feline.

"I have encountered them before," Blaze allowed, but declined to elaborate.

"Then we should hold onto it," Quint nodded to Silver who stowed the Emerald on his person.

Elise clasped her hands and began to pray. *That man* had told her of his intentions to use some power she possessed to revive the Flames of Disaster and rule the world. But the Flames... The Flames of Disaster brought only death and destruction. They could never benefit anyone...

This she knew for certain.

Now, she only had to figure out how to stop this and get her heroes back.

"Princess Elise?" a voice sounded behind her, causing her to whip around towards it. Just coming in from the entrance *that man* hadn't left by were a quartet of mobians and a yellow-armored girl who looked like Rock's sister beside a red-armored boy with shades in his helmet and a scarf around his neck.

"Y-yes?" Elise asked hesitantly.

"I'm Princess Sally Acorn, leader of the Freedom Fighters and Sonic's commander," a ground squirrel in a form-fitting blue vest and bike shorts combo introduced herself before gesturing to the armored girl, "and this is Mega Woman and Proto Man, sister and brother of Mega Man."

"Call me Roll," the girl smiled. "After we get you out of here of course."

"Speaking of which," the armored boy identified as Proto Man interrupted, "we need to get moving."

"O...of course," Elise agreed as she followed the friends and family of her heroes out of *that man's* clutches.

Rock looked around the new chamber he and the others had been deposited in. A quick scan revealed identical proportions to the one they'd just come from, with deviations concurrent with significant aging and neglect.

"Well," the familiar voice of Rouge sounded from above, "look who's here..."

"Heh," the voice of Bass chuckled. "This just got interesting..."

"The coast is clear," a pink hedgehog stated as the others led Elise out of the room. Elise was a bit surprised to see yet another member of her rescue team, but followed along with everyone. Despite the large group, they seemed to be doing quite well in evading detection.

"Intruder Alert! Intruder Alert!"

But then she supposed it couldn't really have lasted.

"Warning! Prisoner has escaped! All units begin search and recovery! Repeat–"

"Well, that's it for stealth!" Sally declared. "Full press! We have to get Elise out of here!"

With that, the group broke into a run. Energy weapons blazed, blades flashed, hammers pounded, robots were thrown into other

robots, and several times Elise had to use her mysterious ability to create protective barriers to defend everyone. The problem was that the robots were starting to come in greater numbers.

"We need a new plan!" the hefty walrus yelled as he lifted another of their attackers and used it as a bludgeon.

"I'm thinking!" Sally yelled back.

"There!" Proto Man yelled as he spotted a train off to the side. "Stow away on Eggman's train! I'll run interference and draw them off!"

"I'm helping!" the pink hedgehog declared, hefting her hammer.

Proto Man glanced over at Sally who nodded after a moment's consideration. "Suit yourself."

With that, the Freedom Fighters and Mega Wo-Roll rushed Elise over to the train where they snuck in after they were certain no one was looking and hid themselves. The sounds of combat outside the train faded as the battle moved elsewhere until all was silent.

Then the hatch to the train opened and Proto Man jumped in, without the pink hedgehog. "We split up to draw Eggman's forces apart, but most of them followed her. Amy said she was going to make a run for Soleanna and lead them on a wild chase, so I doubled back after taking care of the few that came after me."

The rest of the group nodded as the situation sunk in. Now they could only wait.

"This is the distant future, far removed from our usual time. At least 200 years have passed, perhaps more."

The calm voice of Shadow echoed in Rock's processors as he fought his way through the devastated city ruins infested with hostile lava creatures. What could have caused this? And if he was here

and able to see this nightmarish future, did that mean it had to happen?

No... No, he couldn't think like that. What would come would come, but he would always do everything in his power to prevent a tragedy like this from occurring.

Bass frowned as he blasted more of the lava beasts. They might seem fearsome, but they were all pathetically weak. And while the prospect of blasting their practically endless numbers had appealed initially, it had just gotten boring after a while.

Besides, Rouge had found the Chaos Emerald they needed so there was no real reason to stick aroun–

Bass blinked as something out of the corner of his optics registered. Was that... Omega?

A quick transponder ping to the robot got back a standby mode reply. No external access permitted. What the hell...?

"Are you certain? If we eliminate them, it will prevent this destruction?" Rock heard a familiar voice, so much like his own, come out of a room from which light emanated. Motioning for Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles to be quiet (which they already seemed to be doing) he peered in stealthily.

Inside the room were several figures. Quint, who he'd heard speaking stood with Silver and interestingly enough Blaze. And they were speaking with someone who looked just like Shadow.

"The Day of Disaster," the Shadow-like figure spoke in a voice that was most certainly *not* the ultimate lifeform's. "Here are my records of this event. This was when Iblis was freed and his flames released into the world."

Rock could only stare at the images of Soleanna, images that had to have been from close to when they were flung into the future, were brought up. A bit of enhancement on his optics let him read the accompanying text, revealing that it was talking about events two days after Eggman's initial assault with reports that Princess Elise had gone missing in the aftermath. As he read this, the faux Shadow handed the purple Chaos Emerald to Quint.

"I see them," the green-armored robot murmured. "A blue hedgehog and the blue robot my own basic design was based on... So these two are the Iblis triggers?"

"I don't believe it!" Blaze hissed, but the others seemed to pay her no heed. As Rock and the rest of his group watched, the false Shadow used a technique to send all of them back in time.

Bass grinned as he watched the worm-like form of the lava beast Shadow had called Iblis jump out, grab the Chaos Emerald they were all after, and scare the goody two-shoes out of their pants. *Finally* , something worth fighting!

Rock idly wondered why Shadow, Rouge, and Bass hadn't followed them back through the portal to the present as he grabbed a stray newspaper. A quick scan and analysis revealed that they still had time before the cataclysmic events learned of in the future, but no information on the status of the princess...

Bass was about to follow Rouge through the rift when he sensed something. Turning, he saw that Shadow was also distracted. A short distance away, a mass of gaseous darkness reformed itself into the off-color Shadow clone Mephiles.

When Shadow took off after the one who had stranded them in the future, Bass didn't even give the rift a second glance before he followed.

Rouge smirked as Omega accepted the Chaos Emerald and prepared to essentially shut down for a couple hundred years. Shadow had stayed behind to fight Mephiles so often that it no longer surprised her, which meant that she needed to send the Chaos Emerald and backup to the future. And time travel delivery was so much more feasible when you knew someone who could take the long way.

Bass couldn't hold back the sneer on his face as Mephiles tried to talk them into joining the dark being. As if they couldn't read the subtext. Yeah, humanity would probably go on a witch hunt if the world ended, and he and Shadow would likely be at the top of a lot of lists, but it was clear what Mephiles wasn't saying: That the devastation was his own doing while wearing Shadow's face.

As if they'd ever side with the guy who was intending to frame them.

"We make our own destiny," the voice of Shadow dripped with contempt for their mutual opponent, and Bass couldn't help the dark grin that split his face.

And then Mephiles flashed with darkness, turning into what looked like a crystalline version of his copied form.

'Well, look who finally decided to get serious,' Bass thought as Mephiles the Dark summoned a horde of clones.

The two dark heroes charged, only for Mephiles to dive at Shadow and disappear into his... shadow...

"The hell?!" Bass yelled in disbelief as he took aim at the bizarrely flat image of Mephiles that seemed attached to Shadow's feet and didn't even bother to mirror his movements.

"Ignore him!" Shadow yelled. "Stop his clones!"

Bass listened and began blasting away repeatedly, but the horde seemed endless.

"It doesn't matter how many you defeat," the echoing voice of Mephiles mocked them.

"I don't need to defeat them all!" Shadow growled. "Just enough to get warmed up! CHAOS BOOST!"

"Graaaah!" Mephiles yelled as the chaos-infusement of Shadow's body broke their connection and he was forced into a solid form. "Dance my shadows!"

"Yeah, dance!" Bass laughed as he began blasting the flimsy clones with wild abandon before they even got close to his partner, allowing Shadow to wail away on the original until he managed to break away.

"Grrr..." Mephiles began forming an energy sphere in his hands. "Take this!"

"You first!" Bass yelled as he blasted the energy with his arm cannon, destabilizing it enough that it exploded in Mephiles's face.

"Gah!" Mephiles gasped as he fell to his knees. "You..."

"Yeah," Bass grinned as he stepped up besides Shadow and aimed his buster at Mephiles, "us."

Mephiles roared and blasted them both with dark energy from zero build up, catching both anti-heroes off-guard and flinging them back roughly.

Bass grit his teeth as he watched Mephiles stalk towards them. That... that had *hurt* . A burst of machine gun fire interrupted whatever would have happened next, and all three turned to see Omega. Back online and staring Mephiles down with deadly intent.

"Now is the designated time," Omega intoned. "I shall assist."

"Heh..." Bass grunted as he forced himself to his feet. "The destruction buddies are back together again."

"Indeed," Omega agreed as he readied himself for battle.

Mephiles simply fell back and began to surround himself with clones again, but they proved little protection as Bass and Omega, as well as Shadow with a gun Bass didn't recall him having a moment ago, opened fire with extreme prejudice.

In short order, Mephiles was sent crashing to the ground, his clones unable to hold their form with their maker defeated. But even then the evil-eyed being stood and began to form a time portal which he went through, clearly intending to leave his foes stranded in the future.

With no time to waste, Bass, Shadow, and Omega all made a break for the portal and dove through with moments to spare.

The lead with Eggman hadn't panned out. The base had been on high alert, preventing the three from entering and getting the information they wanted. But as they walked back towards Soleanna, they spotted a dark hedgehog.

"Mephiles..." Blaze hissed.

The dark hedgehog turned stiffly towards them.

"Tell us..." Silver began. "Who are these Iblis triggers? Why would they act to destroy the world?"

"It is a good question," Quint added. "The very idea that these two would unleash a horror such as Iblis is met with incredulity at best and often open hostility. They seem to only want to protect and defend. Why would they even do what you claim?"

"Why do the reasons matter?" Mephiles returned calmly. "Unless you complete your task, your future will remain the same... forever. They are currently at the terminal station. It's now or never if you want this."

The three looked at each other for a moment, but when they looked back Mephiles was gone. (26)

"Why are you following me?" Shadow asked. They'd gotten back just fine, met up with Rouge, and he'd gone off to settle things with Mephiles as usual. While he did on occasion take Rouge and Omega with him, he still considered Mephiles a personal affair.

"Don't you remember?" Bass sounded half an excuse away from mocking Shadow's apparent ignorance. "Mephiles recognized *both* of us. I'm the 'Slur-touched', or didn't you ever bother to read my file on what I got up to with pops several years back?"

"..." Shadow had to admit to himself that he might have skimmed a bit here and there. "How would Mephiles recognize the traces of Slur's power anyway?"

"Who knows?" Bass shrugged. "Slur was a living avatar of malevolence before he got himself scrapped by Duo and his power extracted by pops, Mephiles seems to be a living mass of malevolence... Maybe they knew each other in evil high school?" (27)

Shadow bit back a snicker at the thought of Mephiles in school. "Maybe. In any case, we have a train of Eggman's to stop and a few questions to ask the doctor about Mephiles."

Elise stifled a startled cry as another explosion rocked the train the Freedom Fighters and Rock's siblings were smuggling her out on. As far as anyone knew, *that man* was clueless as to her presence on his

train, but it seemed an error had been made and someone was determined to destroy it regardless of who was present on board.

"Mega Woman?" Sally asked Rock's sister.

"I have radio contact," Roll answered. "They're closing in! Get ready to abandon the train!"

"Hold on tight princess!" the walrus, Rotor, told her as she settled on his back.

The red-armored form of Proto Man turned and blasted a hole in the train and a moment later all within had jumped out and started racing along the ground, joined shortly by a pair of blue figures.

"I knew you'd return!" Elise exclaimed as the presence of her heroes finally registered. "You had to!"

Any response was cut off as the heroes glanced to the side and dove out of the way of a massive impact. The Freedom Fighters and Rock's siblings skidded to a halt and stood ready to face whatever had emerged to interfere in the rescue.

"This time there will be no more interruptions!" the voice of Quint rang out from the dust could the impact had produced as it cleared to show him posed dramatically atop the weaponized jackhammer Sakugarne, itself embedded in the ground, with the silver hedgehog perched on his shoulders. "The Iblis triggers must die!"

"Get Elise out of here!" Rock yelled to the Freedom Fighters and his siblings as he and Sonic moved to engage their opponents. Elise felt Rotor move with the others to remove her from the scene, only for the way to be blocked by *that man* in one of his machines.

"Going somewhere?" the madman taunted. "You didn't think I hadn't noticed, did you?" (28)

"Eggman!" the Freedom Fighters took up battle stances.

"If you really want to know, you should go find him yourself. But here's a hint... It's all linked to the Soleanna disaster 10 years ago."

Bass scowled as the words rang through his head again. Eggman clearly knew more than he was telling anyone, or was ever going to be willing to tell, and from the way Shadow had reacted he wasn't at all surprised.

The scowl deepened as he saw the newcomers face off against Sonic and the Mega-twerp. He and Shadow might not be in the market to off their rivals anymore, but that didn't mean the job was open to anyone else!

"It's time to end this!" Quint yelled as he and his partner prepared to fight Sonic and Rock, ignoring the other confrontation, only for a pair of black figures to interpose themselves.

"Mephiles?" Quint uttered in confusion. "and... are you Bass?"

"I am," the black armored boy grinned.

"And I am Shadow," the black hedgehog next to him huffed. "Shadow the Hedgehog. We will be your opponents."

"Yo, Mega-twerp!" Bass called to Rock. "We got these losers!"

Rock and Sonic nodded knowingly before breaking away to go after Eggman.

Dr. Eggman cursed to himself. Those pesky Freedom Fighters and the siblings of that loathsome Mega Man had managed to get past him, but he was slowly catching up. Yes, then he'd have his prize, the princess of Soleann–

An impact rocked his craft, causing him to look back and see Sonic and Mega Man closing in at high speed.

"I don't have time for this..." he growled and punched in a few commands. "Egg Genesis! Crush them all!"

"So what's your beef with the Mega-twerp anyway?" Bass glared down his green-armored opponent as Shadow squared off against the silver hedgehog.

"You use a derogatory term to describe the Iblis trigger," the unknown robot replied, "but the facts betray you brother."

Bass blinked, and widened his eyes as his opponent raised the blue shades in his helmet to reveal a face *identical* to the Mega-twerp's.

"The f–?" Bass blurted in shock.

"My name is Quint," the Mega-twerp look-alike explained as he lowered the blue shades back into place. "Dr. Wily, our father, created me during his travels to the future to destroy Iblis. I was constructed based on the plans from which were made his most tenacious foes. From the Mega Man I was granted problem solving abilities, from the Mega Woman I was given an affinity for ruthless cleansing, from the Proto Man I was gifted a suite of military tactical analyzers. And of course my battle routines and combat programming are based on your own, brother. With an arm cannon, a support unit, and a copy chip of my own I was pieced together from future technology and the best traits of all of the legendary robot heroes of this era."

"Sounds impressive," Bass got himself under control and called Treble in for the first time since this incident began. "But can you do this? Treble! Super Adaptor!"

"Sakugarne!" Quint roared himself. "Super Adaptor!"

Both robots joined with their support units, but as Bass flexed the wings of his, he blinked at the form Quint's took. A streamlined jetpack with metal wing-fins wasn't that odd, but the asymmetrical armor beefing out Quint's left fist to a few times its previous size was. It made him look like...

"Sakugarne's super adaptor was given the data of another legendary robot hero of your era," Quint brandished the oversized fist as it began to glow with energy. "Duo's."

"You talk big!" Bass challenged and charged at his opponent, arm cannon blazing. "Let's see if you can back it up!"

"As you wish!" Quint charged as well, rearing his glowing fist back to strike.

"Things have been going differently this time," Silver observed as he and Shadow took the duel as an opportunity to talk. The blows would look real enough to an observer, but they knew the other wasn't giving it everything they had. "Is it because of our visitors?"

"More or less," Shadow replied calmly as he dodged some telekinetically thrown crates. He tended to indulge Silver. The time traveler tended to Awaken in the middle of events with little-to-no ability to plan alternatives, leading to more than a few epic gaffes when the plans of other loopers derailed what he'd been expecting. "We haven't been sticking religiously to the script, but most of the changes are due to Rock and his friends. From what I hear, they declined foreknowledge in favor of reacting to events as they happened."

"Probably for the best," Silver nodded. "You never know how your own presence changes things in someone else's Loo–"

The conversation was cut off by an explosion of force off to the side and both hedgehogs looked to see the form of Bass in his super

adaptor armor crashing into a cliff face and being embedded a few feet in.

"Is your partner...?" Shadow left the question hanging as Bass extracted himself and re-engaged Quint. (29)

"Nope," Silver shook his head. "Not Awake or enhanced by anyone who was to my knowledge."

"Impressive," Shadow allowed. "Anyway, how do you want to play forming the rift? We'll need both of them since Mephiles recognized Bass when he was released."

"Hmm..." Silver pondered for a moment. "How about..."

"He's still coming," Blues observed as more robots showed up in the wake of Egg Genesis before turning to Sonic and his brother. "You two get the princess to safety. We'll hold him off."

"Right," Sonic shot the red raider a thumbs up as he picked Elise up in his arms.

"We should be able to lose him in the jungle," Rock observed.

Bass and Quint stood a few paces apart, glaring at each other and calculating their next moves when Silver was flung through the space between them. In the direction he'd come from stood Shadow, holding a Chaos Emerald.

"Don't bother getting up," Shadow sneered. "With a Chaos Emerald I can control time and space. You have no hope."

"We won't give up!" Silver snarled as he struggled to his feet and brought out an emerald of his own. "It all depends on us! We can't lose... Not when we're so close!"

Silver charged at Shadow who responded in kind.

"Chronos..." Silver gathered power through his emerald.

"Chaos..." Shadow did the same.

"CONTROL!" they both met in the space between their partners and released their power at the same time, throwing both back and creating a space-time rift in the space between the four figures.

"Heh..." Bass grunted as he considered Silver. "Not bad. It's not everyone who can pull that trick."

"We won't let anyone get in our way!" Quint glared as he moved to stand with Silver.

"We'll change the past and save the world!" the time displaced hedgehog finished.

"Mephiles isn't trying to help you create a better future..." Shadow snorted derisively. "He's trying to eliminate the past you want to save."

Bass considered the expressions of shock and came to a conclusion. "We're all being played here it seems. No one in this time or the future is going to give us a straight answer. The only place we're gonna get that..."

Shadow nodded as Bass looked pointedly at the shimmering time portal. "...is ten years in the past. If you want the truth, follow us."

With that, Shadow jumped through the portal, followed shortly by Bass. After a moment to consider, Silver and Quint followed them.

Elise marveled at the sight of the flowers blooming around the lake. As hard as these events had been, they had also been strangely... liberating. She'd felt stifled as a princess before, unable to change

things. But now... even though she'd done very little, she felt more capable than she ever had. She...

She didn't want this to end.

"Become a strong queen, my daughter. One who doesn't cry, no matter what happens."

But, as she looked towards her heroes, both waiting patiently, she knew it had to. And soon.

Four figures emerged from a portal in a long metal hallway and looked around. However, any thoughts or questions were interrupted as a massive explosion shook the facility. Exchanging a glance, the four raced towards the source of the blast.

Arriving, they saw a devastated lab with several scientists lying unconscious or dead through the broken observation windows. Leaping down, the four began to examine the scientists for any who were alive and conscious enough to offer an explanation.

Bass went to check on one man where he sensed the strongest lifesign, only to get no response when he shook the man. The search for answers cut off as all four were distracted by a glowing object, an orb that glowed as bright as the sun, in the center of the lab as the smoke cleared.

"Is that...?" Silver began as the sun-bright orb dimmed and cracked in half. One half fell to the pedestal below and became a shadowy ooze while the rest remained floating and took on the angry glow of molten lava.

"Iblis!" Quint hissed at the fiery portion as he put the pieces together.

"And that black shadow is the original Mephiles," Shadow finished as the two pieces began to gain coherence enough to individually move towards the room's exits, each heading towards a different one.

"They're escaping!" Quint cursed.

"We'll go after Mephiles," Bass's tone wasn't one for argument.

"And we've got Iblis," Silver nodded as he and Quint went after the fiery entity.

"W-wait," the groan of the man Bass had checked stopped he and Shadow. Bass idly noted a girl that had previously been hidden by his form, shielded from the blast. "Seal it with this..."

The man held out an ornate object, one identical to what Mephiles had been trapped in. Bass couldn't quite suppress a smirk at the utter irony of the situation.

In what Bass considered an amusing twist, Mephiles had tried to possess him, only to find out that his prior tolerance for Slur's 'evil energy' allowed him to not only resist control, but also keep Mephiles from escaping while Shadow sealed his form.

"Who... who are... you? Why would... one touched by... Slur... oppose... me...?" Mephiles gasped out as Shadow began the sealing process.

"I'm Bass Wily," the robot grinned victoriously as Mephiles's shadowy form began to be sucked into the ornate scepter the two had been given.

"And I'm Shadow. Shadow the Hedgehog," Shadow finished.

"I will... remember you both..." Mephiles promised as it was sucked into the scepter. "Your deaths... will be... certain!"

Quint had long ago copied the psychokinetic abilities of his friend Silver, and more recently the pyrokinetic powers of their new friend Blaze, using the biometric scan upgrade to the Copy Chip Dr. Wily

had installed in him. However, since they were usually alongside him in battle he generally found using those abilities redundant.

But for the purpose of holding fast the fiery proto-form of Iblis, he quite eagerly made an exception. The problem... the problem was that holding Iblis seemed the only thing they *could* do, and neither of them possessed infinite reserves.

The two spotted movement at the same time, and turned to behold one of the injured scientists from earlier carrying an unconscious young girl in his arms.

"What are you doing here?" Quint demanded. "It's not safe!"

"I have my duty..." the man wheezed with determination and began to limp towards the altar Iblis's form was immobilized over. "This Living Flame has been entrusted to the royal family. The Flames of Disaster will awaken if nothing is done! That... must not happen."

The man Quint was now deducing to be the late Duke of Soleanna, which would likely make the girl in his arms Elise, carefully placed his apparent daughter on the altar. He then brought out a Chaos Emerald from within his robes and began to gather power with it.

"Eternal Sun!" the man declared with strength his injured body did not truly possess. "The Living Flame that has been entrusted to the royal family! Fall into slumber with a royal soul!"

As Quint and Silver watched, the flaming form of Iblis was sucked into the gem and then transferred into the girl on the altar. As the last traces of it vanished, the two beings from the future released their psychokinetic fields. Then the strength the man had shown left him and he stumbled. He struggled to the girl and picked her up, using what had to be the last of his strength to place her in Quint's arms.

"I'm sorry..." the man gasped, "but... can you take her to a safe place?"

"We can," Quint nodded.

"That's a good girl, Elise," the weakening man said tenderly, confirming Quint's suspicions, "Remember, be brave. Don't cry, no matter what happens. Otherwise your tears will call forth the flames inside you... Become a strong queen, my daughter. One who doesn't cry, no matter what happens. And... Live... happily..."

And with that, what little life the man had finally left him.

Shadow and Bass walked out of the complex with the scepter to see Silver and Quint standing outside, the latter holding the girl from before.

"Were you successful?" Quint asked.

"Yes," Bass nodded before shooting his partner a smirk. "Shadow has sealed the 'Shadows'."

"The 'Flames' have likewise been sealed," Silver told them as Quint placed the girl on the ground and propped her unconscious form net to a tree.

Shadow then placed the darkly glowing scepter on the ground nearby.

"You're just going to leave it?" Quint asked confused.

"Why not?" Bass shrugged. "It's not like we don't know what happens to it."

"Indeed," Shadow agreed as he brought out his Chaos Emerald in preparation for creating a portal to the time ten years hence.

"Of course," Silver nodded as he brought his own out.

"Chaos..."

"Chronos..."

"CONTROL!"

The four all leapt through the portal, but the duo of Silver and Quint took a moment to look at the sleeping girl before they did.

Rock breathed a sigh of relief. Elise was finally safe back at the palace and now–

His musings were cut short as he saw the latest model of Egg Carrier begin to enter the city's airspace.

"Princess Elise, ruler of Soleanna..." the voice of Dr. Eggman boomed forth. "By refusing to negotiate with me, you have forced me to take drastic actions. [Amy is seen in the crowd witnessing the Egg Carrier before turning to run away.] Meet me at the specified point alone 4 o'clock today. Failure to do so on time, Will result in my leveling of this city so that nothing but ashes remain!"

"So..." Rock turned to the hedgehog next to him with more calm than he felt, "this is what Eggman does when he can neither get nor hold on to Elise?"

"Every time," Sonic nodded.

"..." Rock stared back up at the craft before whistling for Rush and activating his super adaptor in the next moment, cocking his Mega Buster when the process was finished. "I'm going to go register a complaint with the doctor. You want to come with?"

"I wouldn't miss that for anything," Sonic smirked.

Elise stared up at the massive battleship hovering over her city. She had no doubt *that man* ... Eggman... would do exactly what he promised. There was only one course of action to take.

"Well, look who's back," Rouge huffed as Shadow and Bass hopped out of the time portal that appeared. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Almost," Shadow replied. "We need you to access GUN's database. Specifically, find out what materials the Scepter of Darkness was made from."

"That all?" Rouge smirked and brought out an object from behind her back. One that looked identical to the scepter they'd just used in the past. "Done and done."

Bass grinned. "I knew we kept you around for a reason."

Blaze looked up as the time portal formed and both Silver and Quint emerged. She had, as she often did, elected to stay out of the direct confrontation between Silver and Sonic and instead watch from the sidelines as her friends went back in time to when Iblis and Mephiles first split apart.

"You're back," she observed. "What did you discover?"

"Sonic and Mega Man... are not the Iblis triggers," Quint admitted.

"I see," Blaze kept her face carefully neutral rather than smirking like she wanted.

"What is going on?" Silver asked as the noise of the townsfolk began to increase.

"The word's been spreading fast," Blaze informed them. "The princess turned herself over to Eggman after he threatened the city."

"What?!" Quint's alarmed exclamation cut off Blaze before she could say she was seeking allies for a rescue mission. "What if... what if Dr. Eggman is planning to release Iblis?"

"Which way did Eggman head?" Silver asked her. Blaze pointed and got a nod from her friend. "Sonic and Mega Man would surely be following. I think I know where we can intercept them."

As he rode on Rock's back up to Eggman's flying battleship, Sonic did his best to lighten the mood. Unfortunately, all of his attempts fell flat as the robot was currently as talkative as, well, a rock.

"Good thing all of Eggman's robots are weak to lemons, right?" the hedgehog attempted.

...Nothing. This was worse than he thought. The whole lemon shooter thing hadn't yet failed to get a response out of his 'big bro'.

Eggman... He was insane. He wanted to use Solaris to rule over time, clearly having no idea what kind of damage he'd really do. She wondered if he even cared.

Sonic jumped off of Rock's back as the robot set down on the deck of the Egg Carrier and began stretching as Rock disengaged from Rush and sent the robo-pooch away.

"Alright," Sonic grinned as Eggman's defenses trained on the duo and prepared to open fire. "Let's get this p–"

A spread of Metal Blades from Rock slicing those defenses to ribbons cut off the boast.

Sonic turned to look at Rock questioningly and did not like the expression on his friend's face. For the first time he could remember; baseline crossover, tandem run, or the current fused Loop; Rock actually looked the part of a robot.

The expression didn't deviate the slightest bit as the blue bomber strode forth at a leisurely pace and used his vast array of Master

Weapons to cut down Eggman's defenses and sentries as fast as they appeared. Without hesitation, without emotion.

And without mercy.

Roll was in the middle of a long internal bout of swearing. After everything they'd gone through to rescue Princess Elise, after all the work they'd done fixing up Soleanna after Dr. Eggman's initial attack and the subsequent skirmishes, the guy just swoops in and holds the entire city hostage if Elise didn't give herself up.

And for some reason no one could seem to raise her brother or Sonic, which left her and the Freedom Fighters, including Tails and Amy, to race after the latest model of Egg Carrier in the hopes of getting her back before Eggman completed his dastardly plans.

Roll and the others skidded to a halt as a large number of Eggman's robots landed in front of her. Great. Just great. She didn't have time for–

Her annoyance cut off as the robots were grasped in a psychokinetic field before being blasted by a massive burst of plasma energy. Silver and Quint landed before them, the latter shouldering Sakugarne as it transformed back from super cannon mode. The feline pyrokinetic she recognized as Blaze followed shortly behind.

" *You* ..." she spat at Quint. "Looking for another shot at my brother?"

"...No," Quint admitted reluctantly before shooting a glance at Silver under his blue shades that few would have been able to spot. "Not anymore. Circumstances have... changed."

Silver stepped forward and continued for his partner. "We need to rescue the princess as quickly as possible."

"Then stop talking and start running," Roll only glared at the two for an instant before she resumed pursuit of the Egg Carrier.

"Shadow... Even if you believe everyone in the world will be against you. Know that I'll always remain by your side. Remember that."

"...You know, I've been meaning to ask: Why do you always say that?"

"Because I always mean it you doof!"

Bass filed away that little tidbit in the back of his mind. Rouge may have liked to tease Shadow frequently and was certainly the most sentimental of the group, but Bass couldn't recall her saying anything so... touchy-feely before.

'Eh, whatever,' Bass shrugged mentally as the full Team Dark headed for the ruins in pursuit of their quarry. *'Mephiles first, my teammates' collective oddities after.'*

Elise waited patiently. Every time Eggman got distracted enough to look away from her, she inched over to the control panels. She didn't quite know how it all worked, but she knew enough from her father's work that operating something like this without precise care tended to cause all sorts of problems. And she wanted to cause as many as possible as quickly as she could, even if it meant crashing the ship with her on it.

Ironically, her plan to cause problems on the ship was interrupted when alarms started blaring incessantly and Eggman began to panic and scream that they were going to crash.

"No!" Tails yelled as explosions rocked the Egg Carrier and the craft began to lose altitude, still too far for any of those on the ground to catch up to it before it impacted. "Elise!"

"Damnit all!" Quint swore. "If the princess dies in that crash...!"

"I know..." Silver lamented, even as he privately wondered where Sonic was right then. If he'd gone along with events like Silver had silently requested, he should have been right here chasing after the Egg Carrier with the others. "We could use Chronos Control to send someone back in time to get on the ship before it takes off, but without a second Emerald..."

Silver could probably use the Time Stones in his subspace pocket instead, but... Well, every so often the energy of Solaris surrounding these events reacted badly if he tried. Best not to risk it if he didn't have to.

"...Why is this happening?" Eggman railed at his own craft as it continued to report system failure after system failure. "Noooooo!"

Elise found she was wondering that as well when the door to the control room gave a screeching protest as it was peeled back by a pair of armored hands. Behind the door stood her heroes.

"Sonic!" she cried with relief as she ran to them. "Rock!"

"It's over Dr. Eggman," Rock leveled a blank glare at the man as Sonic motioned Elise behind them.

The doctor stamped his foot like a child throwing a tantrum before reaching over to pull a lever on the control panel. "I'm not finished yet!"

The front of the control room broke away from the rest of the craft, leaving the heroes and Elise behind, and reformed into the latest version of the doctor's personal craft. A flash of red light and a robot dog stood with them as well.

"Rush, protect Elise," Rock ordered.

"We've got the Eggman," Sonic flashed her one of his cocky grins.

"You two have been thorns in my side for too long!" Eggman sneered as his personal craft docked with another mecha, forming the bottom jaw of a dragon-like beast. "This time, I'll finish you once and for all with my Egg Wyvern!"

Rock simply jumped out of the devastated control room, Sonic following right behind.

"I finally got a lock on my brother!" Mega Woman reported. "He's still not responding to his comm, but I've got a fix on his position! He's aboard Eggman's vessel!"

"I see him," Quint confirmed as flashes of digital light could be seen on his blue shades. "He and Sonic are fighting Dr. Eggman."

"That's good," Blaze nodded. "If they're already there, then Elise is in good hands. They won't fail."

"Agreed," Quint nodded.

"We..." Silver turned to the others. "We should head back to our own time now. We just need to find a second Chaos Emerald and–"

"Did someone order a Chaos Emerald?" the voice of Knuckles cut in as the echidna glided down to meet the group, the form of Proto Man on an Extreme Gear, which turned into Beat as he jumped off, right behind him.

"We found this in Eggman's hideout when we went to trash the place," the echidna nodded to where Blues was holding the red emerald. (30) "If you need it, you're welcome to it."

"Thank you," Silver accepted the emerald and held it up with the white emerald he already had. "Chronos Control!"

With that, a portal back to the future opened up for the trio of Silver, Blaze, and Quint.

"Mephiles!" Shadow yelled as Team Dark entered the chamber to see the crystalline facsimile of the ultimate lifeform hovering above.

"I was expecting you sooner," the darkly glowing form turned around slowly to show that he had a Chaos Emerald in his possession. "As you must know, you're already too late. But there's still time for you to change your mind. Join me, Shadow, Bass. Let us teach this world a lesson and rewrite the future."

"Oh, piss off!" Bass derided the dark entity. (31)

"What?" Mephiles the Dark looked taken aback by the declaration.

"Like you'd ever be willing to work with anyone!" Bass accused. "I know your type! You don't want to rule or get revenge, you just want to wipe out everything until you're all that's left!"

"Such a pity," Mephiles levitated the Chaos Emerald into the air over his head where it began to flare with power. "Truly a shame that you wish to go against me!"

All of Team Dark was flung back by the wave of force, but all remained on their feet.

"Drown in darkness!" Mephiles yelled before diving into the floor and becoming a massive puddle of shadow that spread across the entire surface.

And then the giant shadow beasts began to claw their way out of the massive oozing puddle of darkness that was Mephiles.

"Are you ready, Silver?" Quint asked as the three arrived in their desolate future.

"Yes," the hedgehog nodded. "I know what to do. Today, we will defeat Iblis once and for all!"

"Then we'd best hurry," Blaze smiled at the two. "I can already sense his flames rising again."

Sonic was prepared for a typical knock-down drag-out with Eggman's toys, but just like with the rest of the ship Rock seemed to have other ideas. He went in with Mega Buster blazing, switching between Master Weapons with every couple of shots, probing for a weakness.

Eggman used the laser spread to try and take back control of the fight, only for Rock to use the Mirror Buster to send them all right back.

The mad scientist then tried to swoop in close, only for both heroes to jump on and grab the metal horn. Rock slashed away at the canopy with some of his melee weapons while Sonic threw his weight on the horn to mess with the guidance and ram the craft into the falling battleship. And as they jumped off, Rock peppered the Egg Wyvern's back with Crash Bombs.

As they landed on another perch, Eggman tried to take aim with missiles from the machine's tail, only for Rock to hit them first with a spread of Dive Missiles, causing them to detonate early and damage the craft. Rock then followed up by ripping a large piece of the hull off with the Strong Arm and simply throwing it at the war machine. As Eggman tried to shake off the unexpected impact, Rock unleashed the Astro Crush.

One of the solid light meteors that rained down knocked the canopy clean off and Rock wasted no time leaping out towards the craft. A pair of Metal Blades took care of the laser guns mounted on the front and Rock landed right in the cockpit and dashed towards Eggman, grabbing his collar, lifting him bodily into the air, and slamming him into the metal of his own craft.

"N-now just hold on a moment...!" Eggman pleaded. "I-I'm sure we can talk this out..."

"Talk, Eggman?" Rock's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Is that what you wanted to do when you flew a warship over the city and threatened to burn it and everyone in it to ash?"

"A m-m-misunderstanding...!" Eggman chuckled weakly.

"No Eggman," Rock cut off anything further, "I understand perfectly. You want to use violence to get your way? You want to bring overwhelming firepower to the table to get what you want? You want to level armies that stand against you without mercy? You want to play for keeps? Just remember:"

At this, Rock brought Eggman's face to inches from his own and glared with all the warmth of absolute zero as the Egg Wyvern began to fall apart around them.

" *So. Can. I.* "

(32)

Sonic looked at where Rock appeared to be a moment away from murdering Eggman (who appeared to be a moment away from wetting himself), then at the disintegrating battleship around them, and made a decision. Racing back to where they'd left Elise and Rush, he let loose a sharp whistle that got the dog's attention.

"Yo Rush!" he yelled as he skidded to a halt. "Elise and I need a board buddy! We gotta split pronto!"

Rush barked excitedly before shifting to his Extreme Gear form to an amazed look from Elise.

"What is...?" the princess stared at the device that had previously been a robotic canine.

"It's an Extreme Gear," Sonic grinned as he picked Elise up in one arm and the board in the other. "You worried?"

"Don't waste time worrying that you could use doing, right?" Elise smiled at him. "So let's do this!"

"That's the spirit!" Sonic backed up to get as much runway as he could. "Hold on tight now!"

Elise did as instructed, and only barely kept her grip as Sonic raced for the open air, threw the board out in front of him, landed with Elise right behind him, and accelerated faster than the princess had ever thought possible.

"Th-this is amazing!" she marveled as the wind whipped around them.

"Isn't it though?" Sonic grinned back at her and angled towards where Rock was still staring down the doctor. "Yo Rock! Time to blow this joint!"

"Y-you're just going to leave me?!" Eggman's eyes bulged out as Rock released him and stepped towards the edge of the cockpit, whose hover engines were starting to sputter ominously.

"Is the parachute you're wearing operable?" the robot glared at the man.

"W-w-well... yes... I suppose..." Eggman gulped.

"Then happy landings," Rock waved as he activated the Ray Glide and jumped after Sonic and Elise.

With all of Team Dark working together, Mephiles's giant shadow beasts went down as fast as he could summon them. However, Mephiles himself proved elusive until Shadow once again used the Chaos Boost to force him out into the open.

Attempting to surround and blast them with clones proved fruitless as Bass and Omega were simply faster on the draw, and soon enough Mephiles was retreating to the top of the chamber to gather all his power for one final blast while annoying them with cheap after-images. But the semi-solid after images proved Mephiles's undoing as Shadow used them as stepping stones to climb after the shadowy being and deliver the final blow.

"No..." Mephiles tried to deny reality as his crystalline form began to lose form and melt into the shadowy goo he was originally. "I am... forever... I am... invincible..."

"Yeah," Bass scoffed as he and Shadow stepped forward with the new Scepter of Darkness and began the sealing process, "you keep telling yourself that."

Mephiles was sucked up into the scepter and for a moment it looked like everything would be fine, but then the dark glow dimmed, cracks formed in the scepter, and with a blinding flash Mephiles broke free.

"Fools," the resulting swirling maelstrom of shadow taunted. "The 'I' of now has absorbed your power through our convergences in the past. What may have worked 10 years ago, no longer does!"

As Mephiles resolved back into his crystalline hedgehog form, a burst of power knocked all of Team Dark head over heals. Twin flashes of light resolved into a pair of Chaos Emeralds, the one Mephiles had held and the one previously in Team Dark's possession, rotating around each other in an infinity pattern.

"You must realize now that you cannot hope to stop me with your limited power," Mephiles continued as a sea of clones appeared.

"I said it before," Bass grunted as he and the rest of Team Dark got to their feet while a flash of light heralded Treble teleporting in, "and I'll say it again:"

Treble jumped up, his body twisting and reforming around Bass to form the super adaptor armor as Shadow unlocked his inhibitor rings and unleashed a wave of power that wrapped around all the members of Team Dark. And as one, Team Dark finished Bass's proclamation.

" *Piss. Off.* "

Silver, Blaze, and Quint skidded to a halt before the caldera as the full behemoth form of Iblis rose up out of it and roared its fury.

"All right Iblis!" Quint declared dramatically.

"This time, we finally stop you!" Silver finished.

The gigantic beast simply roared at them again, spewing flames from all over its body.

"I'll distract him from the air, Silver!" Quint yelled as he ordered Sakugarne to transform into its Jet adaptor mode and took off.

Silver nodded as the lumbering form of Iblis began advancing on him and began grabbing boulder-sized stones with his psychokinesis and lobbing them at the gargantuan foe. Blaze stood back and targeted incoming volleys from Iblis with her pyrokinesis so they wouldn't his Sliver. For almost a minute this went on as Iblis strode towards Silver and Blaze, as well as the edge of the caldera, finally reaching the foothold and grasping it with both hands as it leaned down to roar in its opponents faces, even as Quint continued to pepper the beast with plasma fire.

"Now Silver!" Blaze yelled.

Silver wasted no time in flinging himself through the air at Iblis's head with his telekinesis, gathering his strength as he went. He landed on the behemoth's head and poured everything he had into

what passed for the monster's mind. As the beast reared back in agony, Quint jumped off of his support unit.

"Sakugarne! Super adaptor!" he yelled, and once more joined with the mechanized weapon to become the Duo-like warrior. The petpack on his back flared to life and Quint gathered energy in his massive armored fist as he streaked towards the off-balance Iblis.

"Finish it!" Silver and Blaze both yelled as Quint punched the lava beast at full speed, blowing straight through its head and out the other side.

The form of Iblis groaned loudly as it crashed into the caldera with an earth-shaking thud while Quint flew back to Silver and Blaze, his armor glowing slightly with heat, but otherwise unharmed.

As he landed, a massive pillar of flame rose up and formed into a swirling spherical inferno. The true energy form of Iblis.

"Now to seal you!" Silver declared as he took out the Chaos Emeralds.

"Wait," Blaze told him. "Iblis is living flame. It won't accept you as a vessel. Let me. The flame is part of my soul. My spirit. Seal Iblis within me and then send us both to another dimension. One with powers that can deal with a being of living flame with ease."

"But Blaze..."

Silver was cut off as Blaze grabbed the emeralds from him and used their power to draw the fiery form of Iblis into herself within moments.

"You are so naive, Silver. I've always liked that about you. But sacrifice is part of life. You'll never get anything if you aren't willing to give something up in return," Blaze smiled at her psychokinetic friend before turning to the other. "And Quint, the unexpected hero with the ruthless charm. Remember: When one is willing to destroy

in order to secure a better future, one should not be surprised if destruction is all that future holds."

"I... understand..." Quint replied. "And thank you... my friend."

"Now Silver!" Blaze ordered the hedgehog.

"But... why do you have to go?" Silver gave her a searching look. And for a moment, Quint thought he heard an 'always' in that sentence. (33)

"Oh, Silver," Blaze smiled. "I'm from another dimension in the first place and as much fun as I've had with you two, it's high time I went home. Don't worry about us. We have a power back home like the Chaos Emeralds, but aligned to flame. Iblis will not trouble us."

Silver was silent for a long moment before he nodded, accepted the emeralds from Blaze, and opened the portal. With a flash of light, Blaze was gone and the dark clouds of ash that had hung over the world for as long as any living in that time could remember began to clear.

Elise hung on tight as the... Extreme Gear cut through the air in and around the debris of the exploding ship at Sonic's direction as they all headed for the cliff. Off to the side, she could see Rock gliding along, just keeping pace with them and couldn't suppress the whoop of joy that bubbled up in her throat.

It was close, but the three of them just barely cleared the top of the cliff as the ship impacted below and all three of them went tumbling across the grass.

Elise found herself laughing, drunk on the adrenaline of the moment, before she realized that her laughter was being echoed from both sides. Turning her head, she met the kind eyes of Rock, so at odds with the fierce expression he'd turned on Eggman. He looked better this way in her opinion.

"You look happy," he smiled at her.

"I am," she replied.

"That's good."

Quint stared off into the distance as something niggled at his processor. Despite misadventures through time, he, Silver, and the now absent Blaze had finally defeated the Flames of Disaster known as Iblis once and for all. The future, for the first time since long before he had been constructed, actually seemed promising.

So why did he feel like he was missing something?

"To rewrite your future, the past must be changed."

"Don't you dare try and kill my brother!"

"Who are these Iblis triggers? Why would they act to destroy the world?"

"You were after Sonic and Mega Man?!"

"You must eliminate the individuals who awakened Iblis."

"Eez zis some kind of joke? Zose two are ze last in ze world who would do such a think!"

"Why do the reasons matter? Unless you complete your task, your future will remain the same... forever."

"Right or wrong matters little. If we do nothing, then nothing will change."

"Mephiles isn't trying to help you create a better future... He's trying to eliminate the past you want to save."

"It's not like we don't know what happens to it."

"You need to find the being originally responsible for this catastrophe."

"I knew you'd return! You had to!"

"Don't cry, no matter what happens. Otherwise your tears will call forth the flames inside you..."

"You must destroy the Iblis triggers."

"Remember: When one is willing to destroy in order to secure a better future, one should not be surprised if destruction is all that future holds."

Behind his blue shades, Quint's eyes widened in alarm.

"Quint?" Silver asked, sensing his friend's sudden distress.

"We have to go back," Quint said. "It's not over... I know what Mephiles is planning... We have to go back and stop it."

Silver blinked, but took out the Chaos Emeralds he still had and held out one in each hand. After making sure Sakugarne was secured to his back, Quint reached out and covered the emeralds with his own hands.

"CHRONOS..." the two proclaimed together as they gathered power, "CONTROL!"

Roll, Blues, Knuckles, and the Freedom Fighters; Sally, Tails, Bunnie, Antoine, Rotor, and Amy; stood at the same cliff where Silver, Quint, and Blaze had left them when Team Dark approached.

"I still can't believe that asshole got away," Bass grumbled.

"Easy come, easy go," Rouge waved off the robot's irritation. "At least we recovered the yellow and green emeralds."

"Who?" Blues's expression suggested a raised eyebrow behind his shades.

"Someone named Mephiles the Dark," Shadow began.

"Yeah," Bass huffed, "poser hid out in a sea of clones of himself so we all opened an epic can of whoopass on them, only to find out the original did a runner."

"Huh," Rotor rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "I wonder where he we–"

The opening of a portal cut off Rotor's question as Quint and Silver dropped into the middle of the group.

"Quint? Silver?" Roll blinked in confusion. "I thought you went back t–"

"No time!" Quint yelled. "Where are Sonic and Mega Man?!"

"They just finished tearing Eggman a new one," Amy answered with confusion. "Why?"

"Mephiles was telling the truth!" Quint yelled, looking as close to a panic attack as many of them had ever seen a robot get. "Sonic and Mega Man really are the Iblis trig–oof!" (34)

Roll growled from where she'd knocked Quint to the ground. "I thought you were over that idiocy already!"

"You don't understand!" Quint yelled. "Iblis is sealed in Elise! Those two are now Elise's treasured heroes! The seal can only be broken by sadness!"

Roll blinked as a sinking feeling hit her.

"It's not their *actions* that will release Iblis! It's their *deaths* !"

Out in the jungle, Mephiles stared into the depths of the purple Chaos Emerald he held. Had his face possessed the ability, he would have smiled.

"That was so amazing! The wind, the freedom, flying without a care in the world," Elise sighed as she walked along with her heroes back towards Soleanna. The red-armored dog called Rush, who had been the 'Extreme Gear' Sonic had flown her out on, bounded about as playfully as a real animal. Suddenly, Elise turned to Sonic and Rock. "I want to learn how to do that!"

Sonic blinked at the declaration, but Rock simply smiled. "Why not? I think we can give you a few lessons once we get back to Soleanna."

"Really?" Elise looked excited at the prospect.

"Sure!" Rock agreed. "Let me just... that's odd. I've got multiple incomings, and fast. Roll, Blues, Bass..." Rock put a hand over his eyes and peered up into the sky where multiple dots were coming towards them fast. Zooming in, he identified... "That... looks like almost all of our friends and rivals. And I don't think this is a celebration party..."

"What?" Elise frowned. "You beat Eggman, right? What could still be wrong?"

Between the two groups, the purple Chaos Emerald rose up and formed a barrier that halted their friends and rivals from getting any closer. Rock almost missed the build-up of energy that followed shortly, especially since it was coming from behind him rather than the front. A moment before the freezing effect of Chaos Control took place, Rock called up and activated the Time Stopper even as he turned around to watch a crystalline hedgehog that looked suspiciously like Shadow finish rising up out of the ground and take aim at both himself and Sonic.

Rock didn't have time to think, he simply acted. Throwing himself to the side, he knocked the immobilized Sonic out of the path of the blast meant for him. Unfortunately, this put him directly in the blast instead.

The world seemed to freeze in place as all present took in the sight of Mega Man held in midair by one of two beams of energy before the beams vanished and he was allowed to fall to the ground.

"Sonic? Rock?" Elise's voice trembled as she turned to look at her heroes lying on the ground.

"Ow..." Sonic groaned as he rolled over. "What was that for, bro?"

The menacing laugh of the crystalline hedgehog, Mephiles, was his only answer.

"Bro? ...Rock?"

"Rock!" the voice of Roll cried as she raced past the now downed barrier towards her brother.

"Rock?" Elise moved to roll the blue robot over, and gasped in horror at the gaping hole in his mechanical torso. At the sight, her eyes welled with tears. "NOOOOO!"

And with that cry of anguish, the world ended.

"Finally, the seal is broken! At long last, I'll be able to join with you! Iblis! Now, Chaos Emerald! It's time for the final curtain call!"

Those words and an advancing wall of light were all anyone could remember as they came to.

"What is this place?" Amy asked as she opened her eyes to see what looked like pieces of Soleanna floating in a shadowy void lit only by a sun-bright light directly overhead.

"What the hell did Mephiles just do?!" Bass roared as he looked around him. "Show yourself asshole!"

"The Chaos Emeralds!" the voice of Silver exclaimed. "They're gone!"

"Oh, mah stars!" Bunnie looked around. "What all just happened?"

"The princess shed tears and released Iblis," Quint spoke morosely.

"And Mephiles joined with him," Shadow added.

"And became Solaris," Rouge finished just as a rectangular contraption with a bubble cockpit appeared in their midst.

"What in...?" Tails jumped.

"Scanning," Omega intoned. "Mystery craft matches specifications of prototype Time Skimmer which vanished from the G.U.N. facility with Dr. Wily some months prior."

"I was wondering where he went," Blues stated.

"Blasted temporal distortion springing up out of nowhere!" the doctor's voice could be heard swearing as the cockpit opened. (35)

"He's fine," Bass snorted as he turned to check on Treble who had transformed back from his Extreme Gear mode.

"Fine..." Sally mulled the word over. "No... Rock!"

As one, everyone recalled the events immediately prior to Mephiles joining with Iblis and turned towards the sight of Elise crying over Rock's immobile form. Sonic and Roll stood beside her looking shocked while Rush, along with Tango and Beat (having also turned back from Extreme Gear mode), nudged the robot expectantly.

"Rock!" Elise wailed. "Rock!"

"What in the world?" Dr. Wily exclaimed as he took the sight in.

"Some joker named Mephiles blasted Mega Man through the chest and then joined with a fire entity called Iblis..." Knuckles began.

"To form Solaris?!" Wily screeched. "You let Solaris be reborn?! You *fools* !"

"What does *that* mean?" Knuckles growled.

Ignoring the echidna, Wily stormed past all of them and marched up to Rock's prone form.

"Blast it all!" the doctor cursed before turning to glare at Rush. "Well?! What are you waiting for, mutt? Activate that super adaptor of yours and join with your master!"

Rush growled at Dr. Wily, Tango joining in with a loud hiss as well.

"Don't take that tone with me!" Wily yelled back. "Do you want to save Mega Man or not?!"

Rush growled some more, but obeyed, transformed, and joined with the downed robot.

"Better," Dr. Wily huffed as he examined the damaged hero, "but we're still running out of time. Without a properly equipped lab, he can't be repaired fast enough."

"The Chaos Emeralds," Sonic spoke up. "They can heal anything."

At that moment, the bright light overhead began making odd alien sounds.

"You had to let Solaris form," Wily growled.

"What is Solaris?" Quint asked. "You never gave me any data on this entity."

"I didn't?" Wily seemed surprised at the oversight. "Well, in that case, I suppose I should correct that now. From what I could deduce from ancient records, Solaris is a trans-dimensional entity of immense power. If not tightly controlled by someone of sufficient intellect, it would be able to consume all existing timelines until all that ever was collapsed into nothingness."

"How do we stop it, pops?" Bass folded his arms.

"Stop it?" Wily raised an eyebrow. "It is a creature that exists simultaneously in the past, present, *and* future. Stopping it in any one of those would mean nothing at all."

"You seem remarkably calm for someone who just declared things hopeless," Rouge observed.

"As if the lot of you don't make a hobby of proving such assumptions otherwise," Wily retorted.

"You're sure the emeralds can heal my brother?" Roll finally turned to ask Sonic who nodded firmly.

"Elise," Silver stated to the weeping princess. "You were the vessel that was used to seal Iblis."

"Indeed," Quint agreed as he joined his friend. "You should be able to use the gems' power to heal Mega Man."

Elise looked at the hedgehog and robot from the future for a moment before nodding firmly. "I'll... I'll do it!"

"Okay," Sally announced as she held up NICOLE who was scanning the shadowy void, "NICOLE's radar shows that the emeralds have been scattered across the surrounding area. Sonic and I will stay here to guard Mega Man and Elise while the rest of you pair off and search for the emeralds!"

"Right!" everyone else confirmed as one.

"Remember!" the voice of Dr. Wily came over the communicator, "the time-space rift we are in is unstable! Eventually it will collapse, so hurry!"

Knuckles and Blues noted the urgency of the mission as they fought their way through the hordes of lava and shadow beasts that infested the warped version of the valley where the old castle of Soleanna resided. In the distance they could see the crimson glow of the red Chaos Emerald.

Bunnie and Antoine couldn't help but smile as they blasted and slashed their way through their foes towards the blue Chaos Emerald. The world might be ending, they might be having to dodge deadly time-space rifts that would rip them apart on contact, and this might be the last way they'd pick to spend time at the beach (warped or not), but if nothing else they were together.

"Keep your head about you Sugah-Twan!" Bunnie yelled as she shot another flying thing out of the sky.

"But of course mai cherie, I am nothink if not ze 'Cool Man', no?" the coyote swordsman waggled his eyebrows at his wife as he cut down another shadow beast.

"Ah think yer more playboy than 'cool man' hon," Bunnie smirked at her husband.

"I would nevair suggest such a think!" Antoine feigned mock offense.

"Ah get it," Bunnie mock-pouted. "Y'all don't think I'm 'bunny' enough fer that kinda thing, eh?"

"Mah petite," Antoine leveled a desirous gaze at the cyborg lapine, "if we were not fightink for our lives, ze fate of ze world, or ze life of a friend, I would show you right here and now precisely how 'bunny' I find you, yes?"

"Well, now if Ah don't call that incentive to finish up fast!" Bunnie grinned as she began charging a powerful blast of energy.

"Then for life, for liberty, for love, I strike!" Antoine yelled as he slashed an entire group of beasts back into the ether from which they'd sprung.

"Don't let them push you into the rift!" Quint yelled as he used the oversized fist of his super adaptor form to punch another giant warrior out of the way. Not resting, he and Silver continued to fight their way through the warped version of the desert to the west of Soleanna and the surrounding mountains.

"I got it!" Silver yelled as he unleashed his psychokinesis on all of the surrounding foes and cleared the way for his friend. "Get the white Chaos Emerald!"

"You know," Rotor mused as he and Tails blasted their way through the twisted rendition of the jungle south of Soleanna's valley towards the cyan Chaos Emerald, "I think using the Tornado like this might be cheating the baseline challenge run rules."

"Eh, keeping things in subspace pockets is a gray area," Tails shrugged as he opened fire on another lava beast. "The manufacture, weapons, and modifications were all done this Loop."

"With Dr. Light adding suggestions your baseline self might not have thought of," Rotor clarified.

"He's not Awake, so it's not cheating!" Tails sing-songed.

Bass in super adaptor mode and Omega were taking their time fighting through the distorted volcano interior, gleefully obliterating everything in sight as they made their way to the green Chaos Emerald.

Roll thought the screwy rendition of Eggman's base in the snow-capped mountains north of Soleanna was really creepy as she and Amy fought their way towards the yellow Chaos Emerald.

Tango and Beat had been left behind to help guard Sonic and Sally guard Rock. The fighting had ultimately been light compared to those going after the Chaos Emeralds, but it hadn't been nonexistent.

NICOLE beeped and began speaking. "All teams have reported in that they have successfully located and secured the Chaos Emeralds. They will be returning shortly."

Shadow and Rouge stood before the purple Chaos Emerald amidst the misshapen and devastated cityscape from the future.

"Well, that's a wrap," Rouge smirked. "We do make a great team, right?"

"...What you said before," Shadow interrupted, "about always meaning it when you say you'll always remain by my side. Why?"

"Oh for the love of..." Rouge huffed in irritation. "You are so damn *slow* on the uptake!"

"What does *that* mean?!" Shadow glared.

Rouge pinched the bridge of her nose for a moment before responding. Instead of chewing her partner out, she grabbed him by the scruff around his neck and pulled him into a deep and intense kiss.

"There!" she said when they parted. "Does *that* answer your question?!"

"Yes..." Shadow blinked for a bit. "I just wonder... Why didn't you do that sooner?"

Rouge stared at Shadow incredulously for a moment before fuming. " *Men* !"

"So I guess a date is out of the question then?" Shadow smirked.

"Listen buster," Rouge poked a finger into the smirking hedgehog's chest, "if you expect to make up for being so damned *infuriating* for so damned *long* , it better be one *hell* of a date!"

"I was thinking we'd go and 'liberate' the ill-gotten gains of a few of the world's most notorious criminals," Shadow offered, still smirking. "Money, valuable artifacts," he went in for the kill, "jewelry..."

"Oh, and I suppose we'll have to give it all back to the rightful owners or something," Rouge snorted.

"Do I *look* like an altruist?" Shadow raised an eyebrow.

Rouge blinked for a moment. "Yeah, okay... It's a start." (36)

"Ready Elise?" Sonic asked as the last of the seven Chaos Emeralds was placed around the critically damaged Rock.

"Yes," the princess of Soleanna nodded from her kneeling position before closing her eyes and clasping her hands in prayer as she called upon the power inherited through the royal bloodline of Soleanna to invoke the Chaos Emeralds.

Everyone watched the tableau in silence for several moments before the princess began speaking.

"Oh Chaos Emeralds, gems of miracles. Please heed my call," Elise spoke and the emeralds began to glow brighter with power. "I wish to save this world. I wish to cleanse my father's sin. And, I wish for

Mega Man to rise once again!" The emeralds began to rise into the air, with the body of Rock rising with them as Elise stood and walked towards the floating hero. "You and Sonic have given me so many things. Now it is my time to return the favor. I care not what happens to me. But please heed my voice. Rock... come back! To me... To us!"

Elise then placed a kiss on the crystal in the center of Rock's helmet and a flash of light obscured everything. When it died down, the golden armored form of Super Mega Man floated before everyone. He slowly drifted to the ground just in time to catch Elise as she collapsed from the strain of the immense power she had channeled.

"Thank you Elise," Super Mega Man smiled as the princess's head stopped swimming.

"Yo, bro," Sonic grinned as Elise stood up and stepped away. "Looking good."

"Heh," Super Mega Man chuckled as he turned to Sonic, the hedgehog flanked by Shadow and Bass on one side and Silver and Quint on the other, the robots still in their super adaptor armors. **"I heard some of what we're up against while I was out. So, you ready?"**

"For what?" Quint asked in puzzlement as he joined Silver and the other three in forming a circle.

"This," Super Mega Man said as pure Chaos energy rushed from him across the rest of the circle, empowering each into super forms of their own. The usual golden form of Super Sonic stepped forward to join Super Mega Man and turned to look at the familiar pale gold and red forms of Super Shadow and Super Bass plus the similarly pale gold forms of Super Silver, and surprisingly Super Quint.

"...Okay," Super Quint allowed as he flexed his oversized fist and felt the power flow through his systems. **"This could work."**

"Then let's go!" Super Sonic yelled as he led the charge straight up towards the bright light of Solaris with the rest following an instant behind.

"Okay," Super Mega Man stated as they beheld the form of Solaris, an alien beast that seemed to be made of pure energy with its arms and torso encased in solid energy shells. The hands were formed with three fingers each and the head had a pair of what looked like a cross between horns and antlers, also with three prongs each. Behind it floated six cones and its torso terminated without anything resembling legs. **"It's a trans-dimensional being that exists in all times simultaneously. But from the information Dr. Wily is feeding me, we should be able to use the time-space rift to strike from multiple time periods without actually leaving it."**

"We've got the future," Super Quint spoke for himself and Super Silver.

"And we'll take the past," Super Shadow nodded as Super Bass slammed his fist into his palm.

"Which leaves us with the present," Super Sonic nodded. **"Okay, break!"**

Super Silver grunted as he used his super-charged psychokinetic barrier to catch and return Solaris's meteors from the being's left side. It was all too easy to catch anything solid, but the lasers tended to take their toll on his super form if they hit.

Of course, he usually didn't have a partner.

"You think to harm us with lasers?" Super Quint stated as he interposed himself between Solaris and Super Silver and caught the blast in his oversized palm where it condensed into an orb of energy. **"Let's see how you like it!"**

The blast of Solaris's own weapon being thrown back by Super Quint was enough to shatter the already damaged shell of its left arm.

"Heh," Super Bass observed from Solaris's right side as he and Super Shadow fired volley after volley of super-charged Chaos Spears, **"a trans-dimensional being... This might actually be a fair fight!"**

"How interesting," Super Shadow smirked as he dodged incoming fire from Solaris and shot off another volley, **"I was thinking the same thing!"**

Both were having so much fun blasting away that neither could tell which of them fired the volley that finally cracked the shell on Solaris's right arm.

Super Sonic and Super Mega Man grinned as the shells on both arms fell away at the same moment, now they could finally start working on the center shell that concealed Solaris's core.

Super Sonic shot forward in an aura of energy to impact with the armored shell and right behind him were several of Super Mega Man's giant energy blasts which shattered the protective covering. Falling back, Sonic began to rev a Super Spin Dash on the end of Super Mega Man's energy cannon as the robot charged up.

"SUPER SONIC SHOT!" the two yelled as the joint blast tore through Solaris's core.

"Is it over?" the voice of Super Quint asked from the void as the unarmored form of Solaris faltered and fell.

"No..." the equally disembodied voice of Super Shadow declared as Solaris rose up again in a new form, one that appeared to be a stylized angelic icon with eight energy blades that formed wings and the menacing red core in its center. **"It's just getting started."**

Super Mega Man sighed. **"Why can't this ever be easy?"**

"Yeah, right Super-twerp!" the derisive voice of Super Bass rang out.

"He's right," Super Sonic grinned. **"That wouldn't be any fun!"**

"Insignificant specks," a sinister voice rang out from Solaris. It was similar to the voice of Mephiles except... more. **"I can perceive all of time. Even if by some miracle you prove victorious today, by the decree of a power far greater than even myself these events will play out again. Over and over until I am victorious."** (37)

"I guess you didn't get the memo," the voice of Super Silver taunted. **"It doesn't matter how often these events repeat, you will always lose!"**

"You speak of things you know nothing of..." Solaris scoffed, and then paused. **"Or... do you? Yes, I can sense that some of you are caught in these repeating events. That you... remember previous trials. But... why? Why permit me to regain my full strength if you know what I am? Have you given up?"**

"Nah," Super Sonic grinned as he revved up for another Super Sonic Shot. **"We just know we can beat your sorry carcass from here to Eiken!"**

Solaris responded by firing a multitude of lasers in practically every direction in four dimensions. In response three sets of voices rang out from three different temporal locations in the time-space rift. **"SUPER SONIC/SILVER/SHADOW SHOT!"**

The immense blasts tore through Solaris's offenses and obliterated its pulsing red core from three different temporal directions simultaneously.

Below, everyone cheered as the energy form of Solaris burst in a brilliant display of light. As the rays of energy shot forth, the six super

form heroes landed back among the crowd long enough for their victorious expressions to register before everything was consumed by the blinding brilliance. The light then faded to a stark black void, where a single white flame the size of what would be found on a candle lit.

Elise found herself floating in an endless void, but not quite alone. Turning around, she saw her heroes, Sonic and Rock.

"Did you destroy it?" she asked them.

Sonic shook his head while Rock pointed off towards the only source of light in the void.

"Not quite," the robot stated evenly.

As the three approached, the void around the single point of light resolved into a scene from Elise's past. The light was a brilliant white candle flame in a clear glass case inlayed in an ornately decorated stone wall. In front of that wall was a much younger Elise and her late father, the Duke of Soleanna.

"Look, Elise," the phantom of her father stated to the phantom of her past self. "This is Solaris, the flame of hope."

"It's so beautiful..." the younger Elise marveled at the light.

"When the flame has grown large enough," the duke continued, "our world will change. Solaris will allow us to control time and move through history. People will be able to rectify past mistakes and avoid bitter fate."

"Will we be able to see momma?" the child Elise chimed hopefully.

"Yes, Elise," her father smiled with a sad, yet hopeful, expression. "We'll both be able to see your mother once again."

With just a single backwards glance, the spectres of father and daughter exited the chamber, walking right past the three observers as if they weren't even there. Flanked by the two blue heroes, the adult Elise strode up to the true form of Solaris.

"This is where everything began. Who knew such a tiny flame could bring such devastation?" Elise reached her arm out to brush the glass containing Solaris, which shimmered and vanished like mist. Reaching in, she took the tiny pedestal over which the spectral white flame rested and removed it. "If we put out this flame, Solaris will never exist. And then we'll never have to worry about the Flames of Disaster, right? But our encounter..." Elise began to look troubled as she considered that fact. "We will never meet. It will never have happened. I..." the princess's voice choked back a sob as she fought against the thought of losing the first real friends she'd had in so long and a tear fell from her eye to run down her cheek. "To tell the truth, I don't care what happens to the world!"

With that, the princess broke down sobbing over the fact that to save the world and her people, she would have to give up the friends she'd come to love and cherish so much.

"Elise," Sonic said kindly, "smile."

The princess did her best to choke back her sadness and gave the two the best smile she could muster at the moment.

"Besides," Rock returned the smile, "we can't know what the future holds. But even if we never see each other again, I want you to know that we will always be your friends. From now until the end of the world, and all over again if necessary."

Sonic gave the robot a considering look for a moment before turning back to Elise and nodding his agreement.

Feeling more comforted by the sentiment than she'd have expected, Elise took a deep breath and blew out the flame of Solaris.

"Dr. Wily?" a voice intruded on the man's unconsciousness. "Dr. Wily, can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes, you fool," the mad scientist waved off the soldier shaking him awake irritably. "What is so blasted important that you had to wake me this ea–"

The doctor blinked as he took in his surroundings. This wasn't his bedroom. This was the hangar where the Time Skimmer had been kept, before...

"Quick," he ordered the soldier, "what happened with the Time Skimmer experiment?"

"Everything seemed to have gone well, sir," the soldier replied readily, "except that after you vanished you didn't reappear. You've been gone for several months. Base security picked up your reappearance, without the Time Skimmer, mere minutes ago."

Wily frowned as he turned that over in his head. It looked like the Time Skimmer was going into the failed projects file. Not only that, but he was having trouble remembering anything from after he'd activated the craft. If only he could remember what had happened to him between then and now! *'Ah, well. It's not like I don't have other plans I can turn to...'*

Silver blinked at the site of the city of Soleanna around him. Another Loop essentially trapped outside of his own time. He was used to it by now, but the concept still rankled him on some level. Off to his side was Quint, Sakugarne strapped to his back, looking confused. "What's wrong?"

"Hmm?" the robot from the future looked up at the question. "Not sure... I'm getting a bunch of memory errors. Something about a lava monster called Iblis, a shadowy manipulator named Mephiles, a trans-dimensional being known as Solaris, and a feline pyrokinetic ally who called herself–"

"Blaze," Silver finished. "I remember those events as well. I believe that with the destruction of Solaris that all of the events surrounding him have been wiped from the timeline, and new events have filled in the gap where necessary. Actually..." here Silver rubbed his head sheepishly, "I'm having more trouble recalling our current history."

"Huh," Quint filed that away. "Well, I was created in this time period's future by Dr. Albert W. Wily after he traveled to our time in the Time Skimmer and beheld the evil that ran rampant in our era. My primary purpose is to rid the world of all traces of Eggman Nega and we have come to this point in history in pursuit of him." (38)

"Well hasn't this been one doozy of an adventure!" Bunnie grinned as she watched the Festival of the Sun wind down with the rest of the Freedom Fighters from their seats on the rooftop.

"Indeed it has," Sally agreed as she watched Antoine pull his wife closer. After all that, it was nice to see the festival get a do-over without any untimely interruptions like an Eggman invasion.

"Anyone seen Sonic?" Tails asked suddenly.

"I think he and Rock said they had something to do," Rotor offered.

Elise jumped as she saw the two figures that had landed on the castle balcony. She recognized them, after all who didn't?, but she'd never seen them in person. At least, she didn't think so... She was having what felt like flashbacks of events that had never happened. "Are you... Mega Man? And... Sonic the Hedgehog?"

The two looked at each other before turning back and smiling. "We are," Mega Man, no... Rock, bowed courteously. "And I'm not sure exactly what's going on, I think time travel may be involved somewhere, but I clearly remember making a promise to you."

With that, Sonic brought out a high tech board and held it out to her. "Yeah, I think we promised to teach you how to ride one of these."

"I want you to know that we will always be your friends. From now until the end of the world, and all over again if necessary."

Elise wasn't sure where the laughter or the tears came from. She was only certain that she'd never been happier.

The Soleanna Incident as it was later called was the year that, on the day of the Festival of the Sun, a large number of residents of the city claimed to have had prophetic visions of an attack on the city by Dr. Eggman that would result in the end of the world. While prophecy was hardly new to the inhabitants of Mobius, it did have a reputation for being rather unreliable. However, a large portion of an entire city's population having the *same* prophetic vision was no laughing matter.

The famous Freedom Fighters along with the robotic saviors Mega Man and Mega Woman arrived to offer aid almost before word had gone out. Agents of G.U.N. were also dispatched to help defend the city, and there were reports of a strange hedgehog and robot pair that some said claimed to be from the future sent back to prevent catastrophe.

But the foreseen attack... never happened. It was later discovered that Dr. Eggman had indeed set up a base in the area and made plans to attack the city, but had woken up that same day without any recollection of what he was after in the first place. Official reports were that, with no idea of why he'd gathered his forces to attack Soleanna, the doctor had packed up and left to pursue other plans.

"Yo, Rock?" Sonic piped up as the two strolled in the general direction of Mobotropolis. Sure, the two had much faster means of making the journey, but they felt like a stroll. "That thing back with

Eggman... you seemed pretty ticked. Honestly, for a moment I thought you really *were* gonna kill him. You wanna talk about it?"

"...Okay," Rock agreed after a moment. "I... I guess that when he flew into the city prepared to kill everyone if they didn't roll over and give him what he wanted, I'd just had enough. I don't like violence or killing, and I try to avoid it as much as possible, but..."

"But you'd had enough of people like Eggman using that to walk all over you and everything you care for."

"Yeah... It's not the first time I've lost my temper like that either. Back... I remember back in my baseline I'd finally put Dr. Wily in prison after stopping his plans time and time again, except he had some robot masters in reserve to break him out if they didn't hear from him for a few months... But there was also this new guy who came to help me that time. We did good together until he got a bit ambitious and one of the new robot masters hurt him badly, so I sent him back to my dad's lab for repairs. And... well, that new guy was Bass..."

Sonic winced at the implications.

"He trashed the lab, stole the super adaptor upgrades dad had made for me, and hightailed it back to help Dr. Wily. By the time I'd fought my way through Wily's new fortress, I'd had plenty of time to let that fester. The fact that not only had he escaped justice again, but he'd sent his latest creation to pretend to be my friend with the full intention of betraying me. And when I saw him apologizing again and asking for mercy, the only thing I could think of was him laughing as he tore everyone's lives apart."

"So you decided that enough was enough and you were going to end it..."

"Once and for all," Rock nodded. "I pointed my Mega Buster at him and began charging up. Wily panics and starts protesting that robots can't hurt humans and all that 'first law' stuff. I'm not sure what I said

in reply, but I remember being about to take the shot and hesitating... just long enough for Bass to teleport in, give me a line about 'he who hesitates is lost' and teleport out with Wily."

"And with Eggman?" Sonic asked. "I wasn't exactly pulling you off of him."

"I realized as I was chewing him out that... it's just not me. The only time I've even killed other robots in cold blood was when I was under the influence of a virus. Free Will or not, even facing a complete monster, I'm no murderer."

"I could have told you *that* . Still, you didn't seem too broken up when Bass and Omega executed Waltz," Sonic observed.

"Actually, I was intending to try and forestall Waltz's execution," Rock admitted. "I had a speech prepared and everything and, well, when she said what she did..."

"You hesitated again," Sonic finished the thought.

"Yeah," Rock nodded. "And Bass didn't."

The two walked in silence for several moments.

"It's not that I didn't want to kill Eggman," Rock leaned back. "Right then, I really did. It's just that I wanted him to live long enough to understand all the wrong he's done more."

"I respect that," Sonic nodded. "It's gonna come back to bite us later, but I respect it."

Eggman chuckled darkly to himself. Solaris had been a wash, what with it being wiped from time and all, but he didn't consider it a total loss. After all, thanks to his precautions and despite rumors to the contrary, he remembered what had happened during his scheme in Soleanna even when the rest of the world didn't. In particular, he

remembered just how much one of his perpetual foes had been holding back all this time. And he now knew how serious he had to get if he ever wanted to win.

So, no, he didn't consider this a total loss at all...

---

1) *cough*PinkiePie*cough*

2) This line by DrTempo.

3) Let's just say there's a reason that particular battle wasn't shown.

4) He's the Man. The Mega Man.

5) Jet can be forgiven the mistake. He'd hardly be the first.

6) Let's just say the Light siblings have official deputy status in... a lot of places.

7) Meet Mayor Leonardo Dorado, L. Dorado (badum-tish) for short, native of the Megaverse. If the man's personality isn't registered as a force of nature, I can only assume there's been some oversight.

8) In case anyone ever wondered why Omega is never out on the track.

9) Big's not exactly into competitive sports either. I'm not even sure he'd *fish* competitively.

10) Partnered with Light Industries to provide clean technology solutions towards a brighter Mobius.

11) Jet may be out to settle a multi-lifetime score, but he's out to do so fairly. Honest, if still ruthless, competition is something he's come to appreciate.

12) Not to mention the penalties for tearing up the race tracks.

13) After all, he was doing more than his fair share.

14) Did Not Finish.

15) Um... crap?

16) Had Mega Man been conscious, he would have recognized them, respectively, as Volt Man, Dyna Man, and Sonic Man. Robot Masters that typically served under the supercomputer CRORQ when they appeared.

17) The crowd of fans itself was a few seconds away from forming a lynch mob.

18) No, Bass isn't looping yet. He asked Roll during some unspecified earlier point.

19) Blues had decided to stand at the back of the crowd and give the doctor his seat.

20) Blaze is visiting from her dimension, but ended up in Silver's time instead of Sonic's. Plothole filled.

21) Depending on the branch, 'wait and see' can be a fairly common reaction among loopers when new elements appear in familiar chains of events.

22) For good reason, but Quint's naturally biased in the man's favor.

23) As far as Quint could tell, Silver had some disorientation induced by the time travel portal, went 'wha? Where am I? Who is that?" followed shortly by "oh! Now I remember!". And... that's pretty much what happens to loopers when they Awaken. They go back in time (at least from their perspective), have a moment where they aren't entirely sure where they are or what they're doing, and then the Loop memories integrate.

24) The pile-driver boxing gloves would be Quint's power adaptor. Similar in ability and concept to Mega Man's own power adaptor

from Mega Man 6.

25) Blaze is the one in the game who tells Silver that she's not sure if killing to save the world is right or wrong, but if they don't take advantage of this opportunity to change things then the future will remain the same bleak hopeless place.

26) We all know this drill. Creepy guy with creepy voice and creepy powers, yet he seems to be the only one who actually knows what's going on. Do you listen to him or not?

27) If you are now imagining Mephiles in a school uniform, then my work here has been accomplished.

28) How did he know, you ask? Why, he's the gosh-darn That Man. :P

29) A badass? Yes, yes he is.

30) You know, the red emerald is the only one of the seven that is absent until the final chapter in the game. I recall seeing the purple, white, blue, cyan, green, and yellow ones, but not the red. So I can just throw it in here without it feeling out of place!

31) You may have noticed that Bass has something of a potty mouth on him.

32) Beware the nice ones indeed... Yeek.

33) Yeah, Silver gets a bit lonely. Being a time traveler in the Loops can suck sometimes.

34) Some will tell you the devil always lies, but that just isn't true. The devil speaks with truth or lie as it suits him. So do not idly dismiss the words of the devil, for he might be speaking the truth. And that's what makes him so dangerous.

35) What the...? Damnit Wily, you got lost piloting a time machine?! Look, next time heed the mistakes of Bugs Bunny and *take the damn*

left turn at Albuquerque !

36) Yeah, I don't know what to say about this part except that I found the idea of Shadow being clueless for that long to be amusing.

37) Yes, Solaris is Loop Aware. At least in his completed form. This iteration.

38) Hmm… How do I relate going from Iblis as the major threat to the future to Eggman Nega? Ah, I know: "Out of the frying pan and into the asylum."

Mega Loops 9

7.7.7 (continued) (Hubris Plus)

Pitchblende Part 3: The Good Doctor(s)

"...I will at least die with the satisfaction of knowing *I* was the better man," Wily lamented from within the wreckage of the Wily Machine. The steel of his once glorious weapon pressed down around him, sharp and uneven edges biting at him. It was a small consolation that he'd been rendered partially numb by a lightning bolt that had landed too near the cockpit.

Suddenly, metal began to groan and shriek around him as it began to shift all at once and he pressed his eyes shut as he waited for the end. But instead of the fruits of his genius crashing down around him like he'd expected, the pressure vanished and he found circulation returning. Cracking an eyelid, he found Roll crouched with an arm extended towards him, Rock and Robo standing to either side of her lifting away the wreckage.

"Come on, Dr. Wily," she said as she seized his hand in her own. "Let's get you out of there."

"And you do this every time?" Robo asked as they left the base. He and Rock had fallen back from the others as Roll and the other five Robot Masters escorted Wily out. The Masters had been all too happy to give them distance once they'd noticed what was left of Elec Man hanging from his back. "Even after what he's done? Even with what you *know* he'll do?"

"Yep," Rock answered, "every time."

" *...Why?* "

"Because my dad believes that *anyone* can be redeemed. And so do I." Seeing Robo's questioning gaze, he went on. "For all his greed and massive ego, when it comes down to a decision between right and something truly evil, he'll choose right. For all his pettiness and jealousy, the worst thing he does when he gets his hands on my dad is gloat. It's small and hard to find, but there is a conscience somewhere in there. And with the Dreaming, who knows? Maybe sometime a million-billion Loops from now he'll learn to listen to it."

"I..." Robo paused and shook his head, "I don't..."

"I know," Rock said with a shrug. "A lot of people think we're naive, but-"

"It's not that," the atomic robot cut in hurriedly. "It's just... I can't even *imagine* offering half my enemies that kind of mercy." He cocked his head in thought. "Of course, of those half don't have the decency to stay dead and the other half are Nazis, so..."

"Relax, Robo. I know I said *anyone* , but I haven't faced what you've faced. I'm in no position to judge."

"...You're a good kid, Rock."

"Heh, I've had good examples," Rock grinned, rubbing sheepishly at the back of his helmet.

"Yeah," Robo replied with a distant look in his eyes. "Reminds me of *my* dad. Except, you know, hairier."

"Hold off on that connection, Doc," Robo warned. He and Doctor Light were stooped over Elec Man's disassembled form, partway through reconstructing him. The other Robot Masters were lined up against the wall behind them, deactivated and awaiting reprogramming. "I had to grab the grounding element and the static charge is liable to fry anything you slot in until I put it back."

"Ah, I see. I suppose it's a bit early to reinstall processing elements in any case," Light replied, switching over to power distribution. "Where did you find these power couplings? They're *much* higher rated than the originals."

"Those? They were already in there."

"Hmm, must have been one of Albert's additions." The pair worked in companionable silence for a time before the Doctor spoke again. "Robo, can I ask... Why?"

"...You've gotta understand," Robo answered after a moment. "It wasn't so long ago that I was the only robot who could so much as hold a conversation. It's going to take awhile to get used to thinking of them as more than, well," he motioned over Elec Man's body. "Spare parts."

"While that is certainly insightful, I meant to ask... Why did you leave?"

"Ah, well..." Robo paused for a moment to dip into what Rock had called 'Loop memories'. It was a strange experience, having a lifetime he'd never lived crammed in next to all the others. "I hate to say it, Doc, but I have a little sympathy for Dr Wily on that count. I'm not going to try to conquer the world or anything," he added hurriedly, "but you have to realize, you cast a long shadow. I realized, sweeping out the lab that night, that if I stayed, no matter what else I accomplished, I'd always be Dr Light's assistant. I wanted something more than that."

"Robo... We could have talked about this..."

"Yeah, and then you'd have convinced me to stay," he answered, idly pointing a wrench at his creator. "You're *very* good at making people act reasonably, and just then? I wanted to be reckless. I guess that's what you get for programming a teenager."

"Ha, I suppose so," Doctor Light chuckled. "Well, I should hope that you at least succeeded. I expect you've had your share of adventures?"

"I've had a few. I'll tell you about them later."

"Does that mean..."

"Yeah. I think I'll be sticking around for awhile."

"So the multiverse is a tree?" Robo asked as he tinkered with the teleporter. Apparently he had some sort of device he liked to build as soon as possible after Waking up, and Rock and Roll had decided it would be the perfect time to give him the 'welcome to the multiverse' speech.

"...Kinda?" Rock answered, waggling his hand in a so-so motion.

"It all gets a little metaphorical at that point," Roll went on. "Apparently you need a 15-D brain just to conceptualize it."

"...And giving myself one would most likely destroy my universe as if it had never been," Robo noted, nodding at his work before starting to clamp a few wires to his head fins.

"And possibly take the rest of the Yggdrasil with it, yeah," Rock stressed. "We can't overstate how bad Ascending is."

"Eh, the idea doesn't really appeal anyways," he replied as he punched a few numbers into a computer and cocked his head at the results. "From time to time a crazy AI tries to convince me to destroy humanity as part of a quest for ultimate knowledge. Lately I've been getting to him before the crazy happens, but I used to have to drop a block of C4 in his brain."

Rock shrugged at that. He didn't like it, but he understood it was sometimes necessary. They *still* hadn't found a non-lethal way to

deal with Ra-Moon and others like it.

"So what does this thing actually *do?* " Roll asked as Robo closed up a panel and started the modified teleporter up.

"Oh, you're going to love this," he said with all the enthusiasm of a tinker showing off his favorite toy. "See, a little while after I realized that time was just going to keep repeating, I realized it *wasn't* repeating. It was iterating, every do-over a completely new instance of the universe. Well, obviously that made me throw out every theory I had about why I was aware of the phenomenon. Nothing physical would have any effect in such a scenario, so I looked into a meta-physical construct that we'll call a soul for lacking any better terminology." He lectured onwards even as he continued the boot-up sequence, checking readouts and tweaking numbers.

"I already knew they existed and had certain interactions with various n-dimensional fields, and a few centuries of research allowed me to reconcile Edison's Odic Equations with my own Sagan-Tesla Containment Theory. With that to work off of it wasn't too hard to project the container outwards and anchor it to a specific construct. The hard part was accessing it, especially since a solid chunk of my life happens before the invention of the transistor. So I refined an access device that could expel *itself* from the field upon receiving a signal I could jerry-rig from Mr Tesla's lab equipment." He threw a final switch and the teleporter gave out a gentle hum before shutting off. With an almost disappointing lack of fan-fare a silver ring about three inches across popped into existence in his hand.

"Behold," he boasted. "The Zorth-Storage Access Device, or ZSAD, MK XXII."

"Zorth?" Roll asked.

"The fifth cardinal direction," Robo answered as he fiddled with the ring, somehow expanding it to nearly a foot across. "I discovered it curled up inside the other four."

" *Fifth* cardinal direction?" Rock asked, "that doesn't-"

"Make any sense? I know. And yet..." Robo plunged his arm through the ring and it vanished up to his elbow. After a moment of rummaging it came back out holding an old but obviously well cared for revolver. "It's where I keep my stuff."

The twins stared blankly as it sank in exactly what Robo was showing off. Raising her hand to her mouth, Roll started giggling uncontrollably.

"Oh come on, the name isn't *that* silly," Robo protested.

"Sorry, Robo," Rock said, offering a consoling smile, "but..." He held out his hand and called forth one of the spare helmets he kept in his subspace pocket. Roll was doubled over as she struggled to contain her laughter.

"...Oh," Robo said after a long moment. "So, you can just *do* that." One of his eyes started twitching slightly. "Four hundred years of dedicated research. Twice that in refining the design. I started over from scratch twice because of unexpected terminations. I'm pretty sure that this is the single most advanced thing that I've ever created. And you can just... *Do* that."

"They're called subspace pockets, if you want I could show you..." He trailed off as Robo waved him off.

"No, no, maybe later. I think I'm just going to go out and stare at the stars for awhile," Robo dismissed, heading for the doors. "Maybe do a little screaming." Roll fell over, arms clutching her stomach as she guffawed.

"Not helping, Roll," Rock scolded.

"But his *face!* " She gasped, "I don't know how he does it with just the eyes, but the look on his *face!* "

"Uhg," Robo groaned from the back of the van. "I don't care how much they contribute to our understanding of temporal mechanics, I *hate* time manipulators. Quantum physics produces vampires, space turns into monsters, time is supposed to be the *safe* one."

"Yeah," Rock agreed as the van came to a halt. "Flash Man can be a little intense."

"Oh no," the larger robot argued while they piled out and followed Dr Light. "Time Man was intense. Flash Man is just *weird* . Started off with the typical villain superiority spiel, then he starts going on about what a shame it is to destroy a fellow member of the 'bald brotherhood'."

"Huh," Roll said thoughtfully as they passed through a set of glass doors onto a bustling show floor. "You know, I always forget that he does that. Usually it only comes up if we lose our helmets."

"And here we are," Light interrupted. "The Advanced Robotics Trade Show! Here, the greatest minds in the industry gather to collaborate, exchange ideas, and-"

"Aaaand they're gone," Robo noted dryly as the Light twins bolted into the crowd excitedly. Apparently this was one of the few disasters they could avoid entirely, a sweep for bombs and an anonymous tip to Agent Krantz to beef up security sorting out the Emerald Spears without too much trouble.

"Ah, well, I can't fault their enthusiasm," the Doctor answered. "Elec Man, why don't you head to the booth and finish setting up?"

"Of course, Doctor. Perhaps you could remind Rock and Rush they're supposed to be on display as well?"

"Don't sweat it, Sparky," Robo consoled, clapping a hand around the other robot's shoulder. "I'll give you a hand. Least I can do."

"That's... Quite alright," Elec Man replied, gingerly peeling the other robot off of himself. "I'm sure I'll manage on my own." He'd found the other robot off putting ever since their first unfortunate encounter.

"Alright, but all you have to do is shout and I'll leg it over there!" Robo called after him.

The near constant stream of limb puns certainly hadn't helped.

Light and Robo wandered the show floor for awhile, meeting and greeting the other roboticists, until it was time for the debate.

"Speaking against the development of advanced AI, we have Dr Noelle Lalinde of Geoworks International," Mikhail Cossack announced from his position as moderator. "And defending the benefits of further research, we have someone you've all become well acquainted with through recent events, Atomic Robo." There was a smattering of surprised applause from the crowd.

"I'm sorry if this seems rude," Noelle noted with an arched eyebrow as they shook hands. "But I could have sworn the itinerary said I'd be debating with *Dr. Light* ."

"Well, my full name is Atomic Robo Light," the machine answered confidently. "And I *do* have a PHD in theoretical physics."

"What... But... *How?* " She asked, flummoxed.

"It's amazing what you can do with online classes these days," he replied, the set of his eyes conveying a smile. Despite the aggravating nature of some of the enemies, Robo had found himself largely enjoying the Loop, and from what Rock had told him this was the start of a stretch of relatively peaceful time. There was even a chance he'd be able to break ground on his own research lab in the city in the next few weeks and, though he'd been advised against breaking out anything that might catch Wily's eye, he felt that everything was going to go fine.

Wily turned away from the glowering orb of Ra-Moon as the recently reconstituted Flash Man entered the makeshift lab he'd set up in the La Front ruins.

"Sir," the robot reported respectfully. "I found something on my last patrol." He held out what appeared to be a partially melted hunk of rock. "The remains of a recent meteor impact, my sensors can discern something... off about it. I thought you'd want to investigate."

"Such fascinating readings," Ra-Moon rumbled from its perch. **"Please, allow me to process it for you."**

"Ha! Maybe after you've finished that fondue set for me," Wily taunted as he placed the rock in a scanner.

"Hmm," he mumbled a moment later, scratching his chin. "Must need to recalibrate. Infinity minus one? Nonsense!"

9.2 (Pinklestia101, edited by Sh4d0wS14d3)

Penny Brown had been grateful to finally have a loop where she could just fade in the background.

There was a Robot War going on, but it wasn't her business. She had started the loop at ten years old, five years before the first Robot masters attack, and she had luckily decided to focus herself in history instead of robotics. There was no Brain or uncle Gadget to worry about, no Doctor Claw. Whatever happened, it wasn't her responsibility.

But after her Sonicverse loop, she should have know that she could never be that lucky.

There had been a crash noise, and a group of anti robot fanatics had tried to abduct her, saying something about how they were going to make Doctor Wily feel the same pain they had suffered. The key

word being tried, because if there was one thing she never let pass away in any loop she could spare time for it, it was her Haki training. Kenbunshoku Haki, even used in a passive way, told her they were going to be there before they entered, so she ran away.

Then, when the gunshots started, a robot saved her, but it was not the heroic blue robot or his heroic yellow sister, it was a Robot Master. Penny then mentally cursed herself for not seeing it before. By not finding weird how they lived so well with only her loop mother's modest job. For never asking who her father was. And why no one ever told her what the W in her name meant. The clues were all there, but she had been too jaded to see them.

Her name was Penny W. Brown and her father was Doctor Albert W. Wily, she figured that out seconds before the robot told her.

9.3 (Valentine Meikin)

Mega Man looked at Bass as he watched Skull Castle exploding. "How the hell does he afford it?" He asked, confused.

"What do you mean?" Bass asked, "He can make his own labor force, he still has a copy of the schematics for the older Robot Masters..."

"I meant the resources to build the damn castle in the first place, as well as the custom arenas for fighting the Robot Masters..." Mega Man offered, "He builds half a dozen robots, sets up half a dozen areas that would be death traps to any sane human... Dr. Light hasn't really been able to cut a cheque for anything in recent years..."

"He has a couple of minor military contracts under a shell identity, and he actually sells off what you destroy for scrap value, beyond what he can easily recycle himself..." Bass admitted, "Tell your father to look at the home companion market, something like Rush or

Tango would sell easily for someone who can't afford the upkeep of a real pet..."

Mega Man looked pensive. It now made more sense why Dr. Wily could afford to keep going on his one-man crusade against Mega Man, and military work wouldn't go down well with his father at all, being strictly against creating an army. And both Rush and Tango were a lot more house-trained than a real dog and cat…

9.4 (OathToOblivion)

Mega Man was fairly calm as he faced down Flame Man for the who-knows-how-many-th time. "Give it up, Flame Man! Surrender now before I have to hurt you!" he declared, pointing his Mega Buster forward in warning.

"Fat chance! I'll take you on in the name of Wily!" the turban-headed Flame Man declared. He proceeded to fire his Flame Blast at Mega Man. The Blue Bomber leaped over the flames, getting ready. Flame Man leaped high into the air in an attempt to squish the robotic hero flat. Mega Man proceeded to slide...directly into Flame Man?!

"Yow!" he winced, getting hurt from randomly going into someone. Without using Charge Man's weapon, sliding into some other robot usually ended up hurting Mega Man himself. Flame Man himself didn't question it, simply firing fireballs at Mega Man. *'That was weird. Oh well, probably just a fluke,'* Rock dismissed, casually leaping over the fireballs. Flame Man leaped again, and Mega Man slid again...directly in the opposite direction that he intended to, crashing into Flame Man.

"Stop doing that!" Flame Man said. Mega Man may not have been using the Charge Kick, but it still hurt a bit.

"It's not like I'm doing it on purpose!" *'Okay, I know my movement systems don't have any bugs or viruses in them. What's going on?'*

Hephaestus cursed as he tried to track down the source of this latest bug. Sure, it was small, but left alone it could become a huge problem. Right now, it was only messing with Mega Man's slide, but what would happen if it started interfering with the rest of his movement capabilities, or spread to anyone else?

9.5 (Pinklestia101)

"Show yourselves knaves! The Thunder God Calls!" Elec Man was holding a hammer that crackled with electricity

"I can assure the closest haircut you'll ever know, my dearest Roll." This version of Cut Man lacked the usual couple of scissor-like blades at the top of his head, and instead had two large swords that looked like the two halves of a gargantuan pair of scissors.

"Fools! You dare to trifle with the Phoenix? My fire will burn your souls for all eternity!" Fire Man design seemed inspired by a phoenix, but instead of wings it had a Jetpack in his back.

"Let me guess, these guys are Loopers?" Roll asked Mega Man, after she just awoke.

"I wish, it seems that in this loop both Doctor Wily and Doctor Light are fans of comic books. I had to beg for an hour to avoid using a stupid cape I keep tripping with."

9.6 (Mega Sonic Alternate Reaction by Hubris Plus, Set-up by me)

It was another fused Loop with Sonic's universe and Rock had been going through it in some sort of half-Awake haze. The set-up seemed to be largely the same as the first fused Loop with Sonic's branch (not the tandem run where his branch was brought online)

and while he was generally aware that the events being played out were mostly the same, his in-Loop mind and instincts seemed firmly in the driver's seat. It wasn't until he again lost his temper at Dr. Eggman and uttered that line of pure cold fury that his looping consciousness came to the forefront.

" *So. Can. I.* "

Eggman spent a long moment staring into Rock's piercing gaze, all of his own assurance gone in the face of what seemed to be imminent destruction. And then, just as quickly, it returned.

"Magnificent," he stated, even as his carrier crumbled around them.

"W-what?" Rock asked. That was about the last reaction he'd expected.

"Truly, absolutely *magnificent!* " The madman roared, and insane gleam in his eyes. "I'd thought that Omega was the pinnacle of firepower in a single package, but *this?* Without tapping into an *ounce* of Chaos? Truly, the might of steel is unequaled," he stated smugly, managing to shoot a superior glare at Sonic despite his less than stellar condition.

" *My* steel, not yours," Mega Man asserted, recovering his composure.

"But it's not *just* the steel, the engineering, is it?" Eggman continued undaunted. "No, I can see it in your eyes. I taught my creations joy, the ecstasy of pure destruction and domination. But now? Now I see that I should have taught them *hate.* " Rock flinched back at the word, the taunt unexpected and well aimed. In the instant he'd stepped back, Eggman slammed a fist onto his console.

The escape pod blasted through the bottom of the Wyvern and spiraled away from the destruction, mad cackling following it the whole way down.

Rock could only watch, and wonder.

9.7 (Pinklestia101)

The loop had started pretty much baseline, until it came to the part where Doctor Wily made his announcement to the world about his world domination plans. Doctor Wily appeared on the TV interrupting the transmission as usual, then the camera moved a way to focus on a stage, showing a few robot masters who were... holding music instruments?

Then Doctor Wily walked to the stage and put on black sunglasses... and started to rap.

"The world must be ruled by my hand. You will fear my master plan! With my Robot Masters, I will cause disasters. Beware of my genius! I am a master at being devious! If you dare show any defiance, I will crush you! It doesn't matter if you know Kung fu! My creations are majestic. Pathetic fools, you will learn respect! Bow down to Doctor Wily!"

"Bow down to Doctor Wily! Bow down to Doctor Wily!" said the chorus of Robot Masters.

Rock turned off the TV, at least both Roll and Doctor Light were awake this loop. While both he and Roll had been built and programmed to have an appreciation of music, this loop was probably gonna go to the list of "We never ever talk about it."

(Addition by Me)

Rock would later revise this opinion when he discovered that right after he'd turned the TV off, Dr. Light had shown up with his own band of Robot Masters.

"Wily you've crossed the line to threaten freedom divine! And now this pacifist will raise his fists and send your plan into decline! Here to defend the justly right, we will hone ourselves with holy might! And when we're done, you will see the light!"

8.9

Rock and Roll did *not* like this Loop. For one, instead of going straight for infrastructure, Dr. Wily was acting full-blown terrorist. He didn't really seem to care much about collateral damage most Loops, but he also didn't really go out of his way to kill people either.

This time...

"Bwahahahaha!" the image of Dr. Wily cackled from the pirated broadcast of every media output device in the city, possibly the world. "People of Earth, I have grown tired of your repeated refusals to surrender to me, the rightful ruler of this planet! And so, I shall now unleash my greatest creation, the Gray Goo Devil! Even now, my creation is converting everything in its path that I haven't personally protected into nano-machines for its body. If you do not surrender all political power to me, it will continue to consume everything, and every *one* , until the entire *world* becomes my ultimate Wily Machine ready to help me enact *galactic* conquest! Bwahahahahahaha!"

9.8

Dr. Light was actually quite enjoying himself. He didn't generally have Loops without any of his children around. Not that he didn't love spending time with them in the Loops, even if Blues was sadly still jumpy and suspicious around him, but it was a nice change of pace to have adventures of his own from time to time.

It wasn't the first time he'd been in this particular neighborhood of the Loops, though he vastly preferred his current incarnation to the one he'd had the other time. His children had laughed themselves sick, despite being robots, when they'd heard about him being the portly middle age digger in a blue and yellow jumpsuit who billed himself as "Mega Man". On the other hand, getting as his agent a blonde version of Noelle Lalinde who regularly wore dresses that could be described as "small" and "red" had been a definite perk. The hand-held Mega Buster he'd gotten was also a welcome addition to his subspace pocket. Beyond that, even he hadn't taken himself seriously that Loop.

Honestly, replacing Ken Masters in a Street Fighter Loop was the preferable option. Having Loop memories of training alongside Ryu; who may or may not be the local Anchor, he hadn't been very clear when Dr. Light asked him; was a much better history in his opinion. Plus, his age meant he got to have hair that wasn't white or even gray, but a rich black like in his baseline youth. Being occasionally addressed as "Dr. Masters" or "Master Light" had been fairly amusing as well.

Yet, he had still picked up the "Mega Man" nickname somehow. Compared to that, having a blue gi rather than Ken's red was practically serendipity.

"So you're a looper too. Native?" asked his current companion curiously. She was most definitively not a native of this Loop and her question suggested she hadn't visited it before. For one thing, the individual her appearance took after, and who she was replacing, was a male. Nor did he have rainbow-colored hair.

"Oh, not at all Corporal Dash," he said amiably. "In my home Loop, I'm a scientist and inventor rather than a career fighter."

"Egghead, huh?" Corporal Rainbow Dash smirked. "A bit outside your comfort zone I bet."

Dr. Light chuckled. "Corporal, I'll have you know that in my home Loop, I am an accomplished martial artist in my own right. I have won multiple high school and collegiate championships in the ring in addition to my Masters and/or Doctorate degrees in robotics, computer science, engineering, business, and both applied and quantum physics. Were it not for my former friend and colleague Dr. Wily, I would hold a global record for academic achievement."

Corporal Dash looked impressed. "How many Loops did it take you to do all that?"

Dr. Light managed to hold in his amusement. "Corporal Dash, that's my baseline."

Dash's eyes practically bugged out of their sockets.

"I am quite amazed at your technique Corporal," Dr. Light said. "Not many can manifest a polychromatic aura at all, much less as naturally as you do."

" *I'm* still trying to get over how you copied it like that!" Dash returned incredulously. "Sure, it doesn't look nearly as cool as mine does, but it should have taken you at least a week just to figure out how to mold the chi properly since you've got a similar technique that your body will want to default to instead. Not a few hours!"

"I may not have a copy chip," Dr. Light said, missing Dash's confusion at the term, "but as a scientist and inventor analyzing things and then replicating them comes naturally to me."

"Well," grinned the despotic M. Bison. "If it isn't the dynamic duo of the circuit. Dr. Thomas "Mega Man" Masters-Light and Corporal Rainbow Dash of the U.S. armed forces. A pleasure to meet you both. Killing you two should prove a delightful challenge to my abilities."

Corporal Dash snorted. "Yeah, you keep telling yourself that psycho."

"There is no need," M. Bison swept his cape aside confidently. "I am secure in the fact that I am all-powerful. My victory may be slightly more difficult than usual, but it is a foregone conclusion."

"There are no foregone conclusions," Dr. Light shot back with a stern look. "Only possibilities more likely than others. And you give more weight to the possibility of your victory than it truly deserves."

The ugly look on M. Bison's face told Dr. Light he'd scored a nice psychological hit. Despots generally didn't like having logic thrown in their faces like that.

"ENOUGH!" M. Bison roared, his sickly purple aura flaring to life. "Your mangled bodies will serve as a warning to all others that I am immortal and my Psycho Power unbeatable!"

"PSYCHO CRUSHER!" M. Bison yelled as he launched himself in an aura-enhanced spiraling strike at his opponents.

Dr. Light threw his palms forth in the practiced motion now ingrained in his body as his companion drew her arms back and then threw them forward at speeds exceeding sound.

"HADOKEN!"

"SONIC RAINBOOM!"

9.9

Rock and Roll were not in their armor, out saving the world, or in general doing anything one would expect of globally famous heroes.

No, they were currently in the specially outfitted bedroom their father had made this Loop. The specially reinforced beds had been tricky to

arrange so all the necessary hookups for a rest cycle could be accessed, but the Light twins had to admit that is was much more personal than the recharge chambers most robots used. They were currently dressed in, of all things, brightly decorated pajamas like those favored by the children they appeared to be and listening to the radio.

They were also jumping up and down on their beds like loons, loudly singing along to the radio and playing air guitar.

The song on the radio would be familiar to many who had been to the Hub or a similar Loop, though after listening for a while it was clear this was a lyrical remix that took recent events into account.

"Birth control, Ho Chi Minh, Dr. Wily's back again!"

The two liked the song, but even more they liked the chance to just set aside the expectations of the world and just be silly. There was also a particular line coming up that they both loved for personal reasons and they sang it particularly loud.

"Rock and Roll, the robot wars, I can't take it anymore!"

The two fell onto their beds giggling like fools as the song came to a close and grinned as the next one started. This was another one they both liked for different reasons.

"There's a power in the feeling a power in the sound. Its rising up from the underground," Rock began.

"Nobody's perfect down here on earth," Roll picked up the next line. *"But we can rock this world for all we're worth!"*

"And I feel it coming from the east to the west," they both sang together. *"As one by one we do our personal best!"*

"And we're doing fine," Roll sang the next line, complete with echo on the last word that a human voice couldn't have naturally

managed. *"I give it a 9..."*

Rock smirked and sang the next line. *"I give it a–"*

9.95

"Honestly Thomas," Dr. Mikhail Cossack sighed in exasperation. "I don't know why you're still on about your old lab assistant. The boy was a complete imbecile most of the time and a shameless womanizer on his *good* days."

"You can be such a cynic Mokhail," Dr. Light smiled tolerantly. "For all his faults, Jonathan was quite the eager lad with the best of intentions. If only he hadn't become so obsessed..."

Rock found himself listening intently to the conversation. This Loop, Dr. Wily apparently didn't exist. Instead, there was a doctoral student that his father had taken on as an assistant named Jonathan... something. Dr. Light never used the last name and it just didn't seem to come up in conversation. From what Rock could tell, the man had become a bit obsessed with something or other towards the end of his doctoral work and then, right before the graduation ceremony, he'd simply vanished.

"Greetings y'all," a voice with what could only be called an 'Elvis' accent suddenly came from every nearby media output, interrupting Rock's thoughts. The face on the transmission was that of a blond man in sunglasses with a labcoat stretched over his very broad chest and shoulders and his hair in an odd almost-vertical pompadour. "Don't be afraid babes and bros, for I come to you with a message of totally radical importance. For I, Dr. Brovo, have discovered the true power of brotherhood and understanding. A message of love and great justice. One that I and my totally cool Brobot Masters shall impart to each and every one of you by any means necessary. Know this all you uncool beyotches, your era of pain and hate is at an end and the time for brotherly love and togetherness is at hand! The

world shall be remade with the totally awesome might of the Broforce! We now return you to your, ah, regularly scheduled programming."

Rock stared as the transmission ended, and continued staring for several minutes, blinking owlishly as he processed it. *This* was certainly new…

Rock had armored up as Mega Man as soon as Dr. Light finished the upgrades and adjustments and teleported to the first area that was under attack.

The agency where Gilbert D. Stern and Rosalyn Krantz normally worked.

Which was surprisingly intact for something being assaulted by a dangerous robot. The walls were pristine and none of the windows were broken, but the large amount of unconscious federal agents belied the reality of what was going on.

At least they were all alive and largely unharmed. Not all attackers were so considerate.

As if to prove otherwise, Agent Stern came flying out of the door as Rock approached and the robot braced himself to catch the man.

"Your cynicism is an uncool attitude that unbalances the way of the Bro," the one responsible for Agent Stern's impromptu flight stated as he stepped out. The robot appeared lightly armored and clad in a stylized martial arts gi with mostly blue pants that had large black striped and a mostly black top with large blue stripes, held closed by a belt denoting full mastery of whatever style was practiced. "Ah, there is a new challenger to represent the oppressive system against the harmonious might of Tae Kwon Bro. Come, we shall see how you fare against my fabled Bro Fist."

Rock blinked at the calm declaration, and decided to try something. "Can we take this fight away from the agency? I don't want to accidentally hurt anyone."

"A most enlightened and brotastic attitude," Tae Kwon Bro responded. "Unexpected from one who fights for the intolerant system, but the terms are acceptable. Let us depart."

Rock followed the 'brobot' to an open common area where no one was present and there was little of importance to damage.

"Before we begin, I would ask your name," Tae Kwon Bro stated as the two faced off.

"I am known as Mega Man!" Rock declared.

"A most righteous and mighty name," his opponent nodded and took a stance. "Come at me, Mega Bro."

Rock opened up with a barrage of buster fire, only to have it all dodged as Tae Kwon Bro closed in with a glowing fist and slammed it into Rock's torso. Rock's eyes widened as the force of the blow flung him back and he was overtaken by feelings of peace as the energy tried to calm his systems into submission. *'A pacifying weapon...'* he thought idly as he lay on the ground. *'For all its energy it does little physical damage, but it forces energy of the target into a calmer state. That's why none of the agents are really hurt. Very impressive. And... their goals are ultimately peaceful... Would it be so bad to just let them go ahead and do this...? Maybe it really would be better for the world...'*

"You fought well, Mega Bro," Tae Kwon Bro stood over the blue robot, "but my cause is just and my fist is strong. In short, my Broforce is simply stronger than yours."

'No,' Rock's features hardened and he felt his systems returning to full active status. *'Even if their intentions are good, it's not right to force others to follow a single way of thinking, even a peaceful one.'*

With that, the robot known as Mega Man brought up his Mega Buster and fired on his opponent from point blank range.

Now armed with the 'Bro Fist' weapon, Rock made his way to the next area under attack, the nearest army base. Like before, there were unconscious humans everywhere, and once again his opponent stepped out to meet him.

This 'brobot' was clad in armor covered with military insignia, topped off with a combat helmet, and one arm that was formed into what could only be a grenade launcher.

"Who comes to challenge G. I. Bro, the real Bromerican hero?" the 'brobot' challenged.

"I am Mega Man," Rock declared, "and I am here to stop you before you hurt anyone else!"

"Then let's see if you can handle my Bronade Launcher!" his opponent yelled and opened fire.

Rock dashed forward and dodged around the shots, getting in close and downing G. I. Bro with a single shot of the Bro Fist to his torso.

'That...' Rock blinked as he looked at his defeated opponent. *'That was easy...'*

Rock blinked as he took in the appearance of the robot calmly floating in the middle of the science museum amidst a sea of unconscious visitors. The robot looked like one of those 'little green men from mars' that was a popular depiction of aliens a while back, only clad in what seemed like a monk's robe.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Rock found he had to ask.

"I am U. F. Bro of the Brobot Masters," the robot stated. "And I can feel the unrighteous darkness within you. A brobot's strength flows from the Broforce. But you have become steeped in the darkness. Anger, fear, aggression; these are the things that hold us back from the path of the Bro. Easily they flow, quick to join you in a fight. But once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny."

"Yeah, I've seen the movie," Rock raised an eyebrow as his opponent uncrossed his legs and lowered to the ground. "You should get some original material."

"Very well," the 'brobot' stated as an energy blade shot out of one arm. "Do not bring a gun to a Bro Saber duel."

Rock mused that he wouldn't have done that anyway, not with all of these unconscious people around as he dodged the initial swipe and considered his options. The 'brobots' had been kind enough to simply disable their targets, so he wouldn't feel right breaking out his more dangerous master weapons even if there weren't innocent people around. And since that left him with only one non-ranged weapon, he decided to give it a shot.

The Bro Saber was deflected by the glowing power of the Bro Fist, and Rock took the opportunity afforded by U. F. Bro's astonishment to land a knockout punch.

Downtown business district was Rock's next stop. He was calmly walking down the street looking for a clue as to where his next adversary was when a blue and red blur appeared in front of him.

"Faster than a speeding brollet!" his opponent declared before Rock finished taking in the blue armor, red boots and hands, and the stylized red 's' on the front of the robot's torso. He was still reacting when the newest 'brobot' reared back his fist to punch the air before him. "More powerful than a Brocomotive!"

The gigantic pure-energy *train engine* that shot forth was about the *last* thing Rock had expected and he barely dove to the side in time to dodge it.

"Able to leap tall buildings in a single bround!" the 'brobot' declared as he leaped high into the air. High enough that Rock almost lost track of him before he came back down on the other side from where he had been. "I... am Super Bro!"

Rock had only begun to formulate a battle plan when Super Bro launched another Brocomotive at him. With no time to think or dodge, he instead called up the first weapon that sprang to mind and blindly countered with it. To both his and Super Bro's utter astonishment, the Bro Fist completely dispelled the pure energy train engine.

Rock was now at the power plant and once again the 'brobot' he'd come to face was nice enough to come out and face him rather than making him go looking. He was also flying through the air by way of spinning his body so fast that Rock could only make out his otherwise unremarkable and plain-armored head.

"So, you are the one who has been opposing Tornad Bro's righteous bros!" the robot accused. "Now you shall feel the might of my Bromerangs!"

With that, spinning crescent energy blades formed in the centrifugal vortex around the 'brobot' and began flinging themselves in Rock's general direction. Deciding that it hadn't failed him yet, Rock once again went with the Bro Fist and jumped into the air, twisiting around the barely-aimed projectiles as best he could to land his blow. He was not disappointed when Tornad Bro was flung out of controlled flight to crash hard into the ground where his body was revealed to be as plain and unremarkably decorated as his head.

The next area was not one of the 'nicer' neighborhoods, and would usually be beneath the notice of Rock's usual opponents. But since Dr. Brovo's intentions were to eliminate pain and hate, where better to start than the places where violent criminal gangs tended to hang out.

From the looks of it, whichever brobot had come here had been busy. Rock could see the streets littered with unconscious adults and teens who were wielding guns. Well, had been wielding guns. The firearms had been meticulously rendered permanently inoperable by whoever was responsible.

Rock was just thinking that maybe he should come back, like after the police were back on duty and able to make arrests, when an energy arrow passed right in front of his eyes. There couldn't have been more than a couple inches of distance between his face and the shot.

Turning, he saw a robot that was colored to appear shirtless, with camo pants, a red headband, and strangely enough a ram's head. Oh, and a large composite bow with another energy arrow pointed right at him.

"Let me guess," Rock stated as he called up the Bro Fist that had been serving him so well, "Ram Bro and his Bro n' Arrow?"

"Dude, bro," the latest 'brobot' declared as he idly drifted along the waves down at the beach, lying on a surfboard. "Are you the one who's been trashing my bros?"

"I am," Rock declared, "and you're next... um..."

The rather human-like robot in loud Hawaiian trunks smiled as he stood up on his surfboard. "Sorry bro, I guess I didn't introduce myself. I'm the Surfer Bro. And, I don't really like fighting much. I prefer to just ride the Brocean Wave, man."

Rock's eyes widened as energy infused the ocean water and pulled it into a massive wave that began to bear down on the beach upon which Surfer Bro rode his board like a champion.

Stealing himself, Rock charged the wave, determined to reach it before it crested and reared back a Bro Fist to meet the still grinning Surfer Bro.

Rock spat water out of his systems as he teleported back to Dr. Light's lab. The Bro Fist had gone six for six against the Brobot Masters... Even the Metal Blade hadn't been that universal in its effectiveness!

Of course, there was still the issue of the eighth 'brobot' who hadn't been reported anywhere yet. Rock was going to check in with his father and sister (Roll wasn't Awake this Loop) before going back out to look for the last of the 'brobots'. However, as he stepped into the lab he immediately sensed something off.

The lab was too quiet.

Running to the lab proper, Rock skidded to a halt upon seeing the unconscious forms of Dr. Light and Roll with a tuxedo-clad robot standing over them in the middle of a calmly pulsing field of energy.

"I apologize for intruding," the 'brobot' stated calmly, "but you have been making something of a nuisance of yourself in the execution of our righteous cause of great justice. I am Tuxe Bro," the formally-attired machine stated, tapping what looked like a watch on his wrist, "and I assure you I am quite untouchable with my Brotomic Watch."

"Untouchable to most," Rock stated evenly as he raised the glowing Bro Fist in front of him challengingly. To his surprise, Tuxe Bro began to laugh.

"The Bro Fist is indeed the mightiest technique of the Broforce," the 'brobot' allowed, "but only when wielded in the fist of one who

understands and embodies the virtues of brotherhood, love, tolerance, peace, and justice. In the hands of a warmonger like you it is powerless."

Rock blinked at the claim, and then narrowed his eyes. "Well, then. Let's see if you're right."

Tuxe Bro stood in place calmly, hands behind his back, as Rock rushed forward to punch the barrier. He had just enough time when the barrier shattered like cheap glass to widen his eyes in astonishment before the same punch impacted his face.

While Rock had gotten the final movement information from Tuxe Bro necessary to track down Dr. Brovo's lair, the 'brobot' had been recalled via emergency teleport. Which meant that he was probably going to have to face all eight of them again.

As such, when he entered a room lined with teleporters, he only had two surprises. The first was that there hadn't been any other defenses present. The second was that one of the Brobot Masters was already in the room, guarding the inactive teleporter on the other end.

"This is... unexpected," Rock allowed as he strode towards the sitting figure of Tae Kwon Bro.

"Yes, it is," the 'brobot' agreed. "To have defeated us all, you are indeed worthy or your mighty name, Mega Bro. But you have not yet mastered the ways of the Broforce and only one who is so worthy may meet with the master bro."

Rock narrowed his eyes. "And how do I prove that?"

"By facing each of us once more, bro, with two new rules," Tae Kwon Bro stated. "First, you must defeat us all in fair combat, or the way to our master will not open. That is the rule of the master bro. I have my own rule as well. I know you have taken our awesome skills with the

Broforce, Mega Bro. And so I shall require you to use each of them in only one match of radical combat, and only one against each of us amazing bros so that I may see proof of your mastery. If you righteously fail to do so, I will not rise to face you in fair and just combat, and you will never meet with the master bro."

Rock considered for a moment. "Agreed," he said at last. May I take time to consider my choices first?"

"Of course, bro," Tae Kwon Bro allowed. "There is no hurry."

And so, Rock sat down to analyze the capabilities of each of the Brobot Masters that he'd observed as well as the strengths and limitations of each of their weapons.

"Surf's up, bro!" Surfer Bro yelled as he rode a Brocean Wave towards Rock.

"Sorry, bro!" Rock yelled back as he prepared the Brocomotive. "You've got a train to catch!"

The massive energy engine plowed through both wave and surfer with minimal resistance.

Rock raised the Bro Saber to deflect the energy bolt of the Bro n' Arrow and continued running as Ram Bro hastily tried to reload.

Rock hid behind a wall as G. I. Bro ran past and took aim with the Bro n' Arrow before the military 'brobot' could turn around.

The energy explosive of the Bronade Launcher didn't just knock Tornad Bro out of the air, it completely stopped his rotation as well.

Rock began spinning as he unleashed the Bromerang weapon on his opponent. U. F. Bro raised his Bro Saber in response, but when the spinning blades struck his, they kept spinning right around it as if it were a fulcrum.

Tuxe Bro stood confidently behind the shield of his Brotomic Watch, challenging Rock to even try and hit him. Rock simply smiled and sent a Brocean Wave at the suave 'brobot', the constant pressure of the water shorting out the energy barrier and leaving Tuxe Bro defenseless.

Rock stood still as the Brocomotive shattered on impact with the barrier of the Brotomic Watch, and then began to casually stroll towards the again gobsmacked Super Bro.

"So, you saved my own technique for me," Tae Kwon Bro stated as Rock re-entered the room. The final Brobot Master began to stand and take a combat stance. "I suppose I should be flattered, bro, but simply because you possess the Bro Fist does not mean you have mastered it!"

Rock took in the charging punch of Tae Kwon Bro in a moment and casually held up his palm to catch the 'brobot's' fist. The feeling of the energy in the punch trying to sooth his systems into a passive state came over him again, but he knew what was happening this time. A quick burst of focus to his system override and the feeling passed.

"That's..." Tae Kwon Bro's eyes widened. "That's not possible."

"Of course it is, bro," Rock retorted as he wound up his own Bro Fist and landed a haymaker. "Anything's possible!"

Tae Kwon Bro hit the floor and didn't rise. After a moment, the final teleporter beeped to life and Rock stepped through.

Rock blinked as he appeared on the roof of the building and took in the appearance of Dr. Brovo. The massive barrel chest he'd been expecting. Likewise the muscled tree-trunk arms. The comparatively tiny waist and legs on the other hand...

"So, you're the Mega Bro who, ah, mastered the Way of the Bro so quickly?" the man stated with crossed arms and his eyebrows barely visible over his sunglasses. "You're, ah, little shorter than what I expected."

Rock raised an eyebrow at that. "It doesn't matter, Dr. Brovo, I'm here to stop you."

"Now why would ya wanna do a thing like that?" Dr. Brovo asked in his naturally 'Elvis' voice. "The Way of the Bro brings peace and understanding to all. People have too much pain and hate in them as it is. They seek selfish ends with force and lies, never caring about who they gotta trample to do so. They blindly attack what is different and never take the time to see what about each other is the same. They need to be shown this great light so that they can lay down their weapons of war and embrace each other in the spirit of love and brotherhood. And if ol' Doc Light is still the same cool bro he was when I left, you, ah, should know this. We should be brothers in this great crusade, not enemies."

"I know how it is," Rock admitted, "but this isn't the way. Not everyone follows the best path, but each of us needs to choose our own path, not have it chosen for us. Even if our goals are the same, I can't condone your methods. To force others to follow the ways of peace is no different than forcing them to follow any other way."

"Hmm... you speak well, little bro," Dr. Brovo rubbed his chin. "But you haven't seen what I have. You haven't learned what I learned. In the deep forests of the fabled ninja, I learned how a man communicates his feelings with his fists. On the dark angry streets, I learned how to use those same fists for great justice. In a galaxy far, far, away I learned how to use the Broforce to seek peace and

knowledge. In the mythical land of Hyrule, I learned how to tap the Broforce for courage! I've been many places and many things, for I am–"

"Obviously a looper," Rock interrupted, unimpressed.

"Oh, you too, bro?" Dr. Brovo's facial muscles twitched in the manner of someone blinking rapidly.

"Local Anchor," Rock replied. "Well, one of them. It's complicated."

"Gotcha," Dr. Brovo nodded. "But then you should understand the importance of my, ah, mission even better. For eventually, as all things must, the Loops will end. And the nature of the multiverse at the time will become the new reality everywhere. If by then I can spread my message of brotherhood to all the corners of creation, then the new multiverse will be a place of peace, love, and understanding among all!"

"And I'll have to stop you," Rock replied. "For everyone is unique and has their own path to follow, and to force them to follow yours is to betray the value of the very brotherhood you preach. You must understand, if all are to join in brotherhood, we must not only see how we are the same, but we must also embrace our differences and allow them to make us stronger as a whole. To love others even when those others don't accept it. That is the true meaning of brotherhood."

Dr. Brovo was silent for a moment. "You speak strongly, little bro. But as I, ah, said before, I have learned how a man communicates his feelings with his fists." Dr. Brovo uncrossed his arms and spread them wide. "So now you too must prove yourself a man and communicate your beliefs with your fists, while I do the same! But beware! For like the supersonic jet, these fists can move faster than sound!"

Rock recognized the stance as one his father had learned in a recent fused Loop of his and in the moment before the attack was

launched, he cupped his hands around his stomach and gathered energy to counter it.

"SONIC BOOM!"

"HADOKEN!"

The explosion of force as the two attacks met obscured the rooftop for a few moments, and when it cleared Rock could see that Dr. Brovo was blinking in surprise again.

"So, you've, ah, been there too?" he said at last.

"No, but my dad has and he taught me," Rock admitted.

"Gotcha," Dr. Brovo nodded. "Well, then I suppose we should do this proper-like," he continued as he turned to a stance meant to launch a charging punch and began to gather the same energy around his fist as what the Brobot Masters used.

Rock blinked, and then took a similar stance, calling on the same technique. Along with the energy, he did his best to lend weight to Dr. Brovo's words about communicating beliefs through fists and focused on everything he'd learned. Yes, there were people who did bad things. There were those who lost their way. But even though he'd had to fight countless times, he still believed that people could be shown the path to understanding and peace with patience instead of force. With those thoughts firmly in his processors, Rock stared into the sunglasses-covered eyes of his opponent and prepared himself.

At some unseen signal, both opponents launched themselves at each other, fists extended to meet knuckle-to-knuckle, and both shouted the name of the technique.

"BRO FIST!"

"I've been such a fool," Dr. Brovo stated for the nth time. Rock hadn't exactly been counting. He was too busy trying to wrap his mind around the fact that his opponent had done a complete one-eighty after a single exchange of punches.

"Look," Rock finally said. "Not to complain, but surely I can't have been the first to beat you at this if you've been to as many other branches as you claim. I'm a relatively young looper after all."

"You ain't," Dr. Brovo admitted. "But all the others... they looked down on me when they did. I could feel it in their fists. The mamasitas all slap me for trying ta appreciate them like a man should appreciate a woman and call me a womanizer or a pervert. All a' the dudes just think I'm a bigger fool than the ones that actually make a career outta being fools. I guess they were right about that."

"Um..." Rock wasn't too sure what to say to that.

"But you?" the man turned to Rock suddenly enough to make the robot jump. "I could feel it in your fist. You actually believe in me. You actually see something in me to believe in. Not... not many people see that in ol' Johnny Bravo."

"So your real name's Johnathan Bravo?" Rock asked.

"You, ah, heard my full name?" the man, Johnny, looked surprised.

"Sorta," Rock nodded. "You were my dad's old lab assistant this Loop, remember? He mentioned you a few times, just never your last name."

"Huh, well call me Johnny," Johnny Bravo smiled, "all my friends do. I just gotta ask, how did you find it in yourself to believe in someone like me who lost his way so badly?"

Rock laughed at that. "I somehow manage to find it in myself to believe a career madman bent on taking over the world just so people will recognize his brilliance can be a better person. Despite

literally countless attempts to prove me wrong. I won't lie, it's hard sometimes to keep believing in him, but you? You just want to make the world a better place without hurting people to do it. It's easy to believe in someone like that."

Johnny smiled and extended his fist towards Rock. "Well, that's a mighty nice thing to say, bro."

Rock smiled back as he tapped his own fist to Johnny's.

7.7.7 continued) While the 'Hidden Weapons' style subspace pocket that Ranma developed from one of his rival's techniques is the most common variation of subspace pocket, there's nothing preventing others from inventing their own variation like Robo clearly ha–wait a second... What did Wily just say? Infinity minus one? Ohhhhh snap...

9.2) Penny is the Anchor of the Inspector Gadget Loops. She generally has to deal with her uncle who's convinced *he's* the Anchor.

9.3) Well, that's certainly one possible way Wily affords everything...

9.4) Don't you hate it when you press one button and the game acts like you pressed a different one?

9.5) You should see the Loops where they're giant robot fanboys instead...

9.6) Technically Eggman *has* taught several of his creations hate. It just so happens that they tend to end up hating *him* .

9.7) EPIC RAP BATTLES OF... Wait, didn't I already do this joke?

8.9) Well, *that* escalated fa–wait... What in the world is up with this numbering...?

9.8) Much better. This happens more or less at the same time as the My Mega Pony Loop (upcoming here, Season one already posted in the MLP Loops). Dr. Light ending up as the Bad Box Art Mega Man was too funny for me to pass up. I imagine his kids (Rock, Roll, and Blues) think the whole thing is *hilarious* .

9.9) *Put your body in overdrive!*

9.95) Come at me, bro.

My Mega Pony: Season 1

AN: Finally I have reached a point where I feel I'm not getting ahead of myself if I post this!

My Mega Pony: Season 1

Twilight Awoke this loop in the middle of the familiar library tower, reading a book she was actually unfamiliar with. She decided to take a moment to review her memories to figure out just why she was reading it in the first place.

"Geez, Twilight," Spike's voice cut into her thoughts. "What's got you so excited?"

"The princess assigned me to oversee preparations for the Summer Sun Celebration!" Twilight heard herself exclaiming with very uncharacteristic eagerness in her voice. She'd originally been annoyed at the assignment because of focusing on the return of Nightmare Moon, and while it had become a higher point since then, it was fairly routine due to the Loops. " *In Ponyville!* "

"Uh, yeah," Spike said suspiciously. "She does that almost every Loop. It's more exciting when that's *not* what happens, remember?"

'Okay, looping Spike confirmed,' Twilight thought to herself as her mouth took over again.

"But Spike," she heard herself say on autopilot, like this was a familiar rant for this version of her, "it's *Ponyville* ! The home of *Light Labs* ! The most advanced and innovative technomagical research and development company in the history of *ever* !"

'Dear Tree,' Twilight thought in dismay as she found her mouth was fully on Loop memory autopilot and she couldn't stop it, *'I'm a fanfilly.'*

"Huh?" Spike said intelligently. Twilight could sympathize. This was rather out of left field.

"Founded by the earth pony genius Dr. Light and his partner Dr. Wily, Light Labs is at least a thousand years ahead of anyone else in the field of technomagical development. The two doctors' discoveries on how earth pony magic can be channelled through solid mediums such as crystals and metals revolutionized magical studies around the world, but they weren't satisfied with that! They went on to show how one race's magic could be converted into another's through controlled processes, not only allowing earth ponies and pegasi to power unicorn devices, but they've broken the monopoly that pegasi have had on large scale weather manipulation and earth ponies have possessed on quality produce since the time of the founders! They've even made fully autonomous mechanical robots for commercial and industrial usage that further revolutionized Equestria's economy! And they're all set to unveil their latest inventions the day after the Summer Sun Celebration! I'll be able to get front row seats! And maybe they can autograph my cloud boots! *SQUEEEEEEEE!*"

'Holy chlorophyll,' Twilight thought as she lined up the involuntary rant with her now-examined memories for this loop, *'two* Unawake *earth ponies did all that in what seems like an Equestria baseline? Fanfilly tendencies have been justified.'*

Checking in on the preparations for the summer sun celebration had gone smoothly. Of the usual Elements only Dash wasn't Awake this time. A teen Spike had stayed with Rarity to absolutely no shock and overall, no real surprises had occurred save that Fluttershy had decided that she was going to be singing along with her bird choir. The yellow pegasus may have become more confident over the course of the Loops, but what amounted to a solo public performance, even knowing it would likely be interrupted by Nightmare Moon, was a big step for her.

And now she finally had some free time to check out this "Light Labs" place. Such an establishment most likely meant new loopers visiting for a fused Loop, but there was always the slim chance the Loop was just a particularly esoteric variant of Equestria. Those did happen from time to time.

But in any case, she'd get to meet the brilliant minds behind all of those inventions she recalled from her Loop memories, talk with them, exchange ideas. She was so excited she...

...Was apparently doing the happy hoofy dance in the middle of the street. Pine, but these fanfilly tendencies she'd gotten for the Loop were deeply ingrained.

"Well, hello there. Who might you two be?" Twilight greeted the two fillies, well one filly and one robot in the form of a filly, that had answered the lab's door. She knew the first to be Scootaloo and the second looked surprisingly like Silver Spoon, but she had to play ignorant just in case they weren't Awake.

"I'm Scootaloo Light," the orange pegasus filly beamed, "and this is my friend Silver Spoon! We both Awoke real early this morning miss...?" (1)

"Twilight Sparkle," the so-named unicorn beamed back, catching the subtle inflection signaling that the two were Awake. "How has the L–"

Twilight cut herself off with a cough when Scootaloo and Silver made the 'not here' signal. Right. Explaining might be awkward if the wrong person overheard.

"Sorry," she apologized. "How is life at the lab? I imagine it's very exciting! Do you ever have any other friends over?"

"Nah," Scootaloo answered, letting her know that it was just the orange pegasus and Silver of the expanded CMC that were Awake, "not many are too interested in this kind of stuff so my adopted family

and I don't get many visitors. Though I've got the coolest older brother and sister by 100%!"

Twilight raised an eyebrow. Only 20% lower than looping Rainbow Dash. High praise from Scootaloo indeed. "Well, do you think anyone would mind if I came in and met the doctors?"

"Not at all!" Scootaloo chirped. "Well, uncle Wily might be a little irate, but that's because he's really protective of the stuff he and dad invent."

"Yeah," Silver added, "he takes a little getting used to." (2)

"I promise not to steal anything," Twilight made the Pinkie Promise gestures as the two led her inside. *'Apple Bloom will never forgive me if I don't get her in here somehow,'* Twilight found herself thinking. Even if Apple Bloom wasn't Awake this time, the looping version would never let Twilight live it down if she didn't find some way to get her inside Light Labs. "I just want to meet the two most brilliant stallions in all Equestria!"

"Fanfilly much?" Silver arched a mechanical eyebrow as the purple mare squealed with glee.

"I thought I had that under control," Twilight blushed as Scootaloo snickered.

As it turned out, she got the full tour. Dr. Wily was somewhat abrasive, but some liberal compliments of his intelligence and a bit of buttering up brought him around rather quickly. Dr. Light, by comparison, seemed embarrassed by such attention but was very enthusiastic about sharing his love for science and invention. Neither of them seemed like they were trying to reconcile any memories that conflicted with their lives in Equestria.

Along the tour, she'd met Dr. Light's twin children, his son Rock and his daughter Roll, who were two of the friendliest ponies she'd ever

met. Though for some reason Scootaloo and Silver snickered when she told them this and even the twin earth ponies had given her an amused look.

Towards the end, she even got a sneak preview of the doctors latest inventions. A series of six cutting edge industrial robots with personalities programmed to be so close to a real pony that they could react and make decisions like one, in addition to being able to issue commands to lesser industrial robots to facilitate a more efficient work environment. It looked to be the start of a technological revolution the likes of which Equestria usually didn't see outside the discovery of an alien spacecraft, and as she bid her hosts farewell she was excited to see what direction it would go in.

The whole thing was causing her memory to tickle a little bit too, which probably meant this was a fused Loop after all. But she'd perused so much of the Hub's fiction that it was hard to place a new Loop setting immediately, especially if it deviated significantly. Like, say, being dropped in Equestria. Plus she had a backlog of fiction she *still* hadn't gotten around to reading even after all this time. The Hub had a *lot* of published works after all.

Even so, she probably could have identified the visitors in a few moments using the search engine she'd developed to sift through the vast Hub media she had digitally stored. However, she found she was enjoying the feeling of newness and the challenge of figuring it out for herself.

"Miss Twilight?" Scootaloo caught up with her a short ways off from the lab. "My brother and sister this Loop wanted me to tell you to meet them later. I told them you'd probably be at the library, so they said they'd meet you there after Pinkie's party."

"Thanks Scootaloo," Twilight smiled. So, the Light siblings were the visiting loopers? She looked forward to meeting them properly then.

Pinkie's typical welcome party was in full swing. Twilight had been mildly surprised that it wasn't a 'welcome new loopers' party as well, but she hadn't brought it up in case she set the party pony off and ended up with Ponyville buried in confetti or something stranger. (3) Currently she was talking with Rainbow Dash when something the other mare said caught her attention.

"Wait," Twilight's found herself interrupting what the current variation of Rainbow Dash had said to her, " *you're* the 'subject' who volunteered for the *'Rainbooms: The Nature and Capabilities of Pegasus Magic'* study?! Ohmygosh! It's so great to meet you! Can I get your auto–*ahem*"

Twilight blushed furiously as the Unawake version of her friend began laughing her head off. *'Tree damn this Loop and the fanfilly tendencies that come with it!'* she yelled mentally. She idly wondered if her natural tendency to get excited over intellectual pursuits was making it harder to resist the impulses that came with her Loop memories. It could be the nearness of the native personality variant to her baseline was making it harder to suppress, which would be an interesting study come to think of it.

"Sorry," she apologized, "I don't know what–"

"Forget it!" Dash waved her off. "The docs were about the only ponies who gave my claim of doing a Sonic Rainboom back then any credit at all, and they were nice enough to help me get set up in Ponyville when half of Cloudsdale blamed me when the docs broke the weather monopoly. For eggheads, they're really cool, and it's great to know somepony actually appreciates what we did together. Besides, Scoots told me that you were a little excitable over that kind of stuff." (4)

"I'll bet she did," Twilight blushed again. "Say, do you know about the pegasus harmpph?"

She'd been about to say 'harness' when Dash shoved her hoof into Twilight's mouth.

"Shhh!" the rainbow-maned pegasus hushed her and glanced around the party to see who'd overheard before removing her hoof and continuing in a whisper. "That's supposed to be a secret! Scoots told me you'd gotten the special tour, but that project's hush-hush! And, yeah, I know about it. I'm the one they're testing it against. Rock, and sometimes Roll, strap the thing on and pretty much try to keep up with me. It's not nearly ready, but when it is it's gonna make Cloud Boots obsolete."

"Wow," she whispered back. "They must be pretty brave ponies. Have they always been like that?"

"What do you mean?" Dash blinked.

"Well, what were they like when they were younger?" Twilight asked, fishing for some information on the visiting loopers before they met up after the party. "Did you go to school with them?"

"Did I go to–?" Dash started before cracking up again.

"What?" Twilight inquired, thoroughly confused.

" *Oh* , no!" Dash giggled. "Not spoiling the surprise! Rock and Roll would be pissed if I did that! In fact, I should probably go grab Scoots before she slips up, later!"

Twilight twitched as the twin ponies laughed and refused to let her and her looping friends in on the surprise they had in store. It was after the party and Rock and Roll had joined her, Spike, and the other four Awake Elements for a quiet meet and greet. They were indeed loopers and they'd already had the 'welcome to the multiverse' speech so that sometimes awkward hurdle was cleared. The only hiccup was Pinkie having to be regularly restrained from turning it into a full-blown welcome party for the brother and sister pair.

"Sorry, Twilight," Rock grinned as he tapped his boots on the floor. The earth pony stallion's blue metal boots matched his coat and his brown mane was, as Rarity might put it, 'stylishly unkempt'. Topping off his appearance was a tool box cutie mark. "But if you can't tell then we're not letting you know before dad gets a chance. He's been planning this for a while."

"Gah!" Pinkie yelled suddenly. "I can't take it! You've gotta let me throw a 'welcome to Equestria's Loop' party for you!"

"But we already had one of your 'welcome to Ponyville' parties," Roll, the cream-coated and yellow-maned earth pony mare with a cutie mark of a metal broom and red metallic slippers over her hooves, placated. "And it was a lot of fun."

"But it's not the same! You weren't Awake for that one! None of us were!" Pinkie insisted, pulling out a party petard and starting to arm it.

"Not without the whole family," Rock insisted. Surprisingly, Pinkie stopped and sighed as she disarmed her party munitions.

"Sorry, Pinkie," Roll apologized, "but we'd like to have our brother here for that."

"Yeah, okay," the party pony moped for a moment before straightening. "But I get to throw you a *huge* 'family getting back together' party on top of it when that happens."

"You have another brother?" Twilight asked after the two had agreed to Pinkie's condition.

"Our older brother Blues," Roll nodded.

"He's... estranged at the moment," Rock told them.

"Oh," Twilight blinked. "How long has it been that way?"

"Since our baseline," Roll informed them as her brother sighed. "He's stubborn like that."

The Equestrian loopers blinked as one.

"How...?" Rarity started.

"It's complicated," Rock told them. "And he's repeatedly asked we not say anything more on the subject."

"Well," Twilight decided to change the subject before the atmosphere got any more depressing, "as you may or may not have heard, we like to consider ourselves a sanctuary Loop. We can handle all the native problems just fine, so you two can feel free to take a vacation and relax if you like."

"Er..." Rock hedged and Twilight realized that her offer had apparently not served to reduce tension. "How enforceable is that?"

"We've had some pretty good success using the Elements of Harmony to keep the peace even when visiting loopers don't want to play nice," Twilight told them.

"Oh, yes," Rarity chimed in. "A nice time out on the Moon works wonders for troublemakers."

"No," Rock shook his head, "I mean..."

"What my brother's trying to say," Roll filled in, "is if that's backed up by your Loop's nature or your local admin?"

"Ah, no," Applejack looked confused. "Why would it be?"

"Sorry," Rock apologized, "but our Loop is... well 'anti-sanctuary' probably fits. You see, our Loops usually start out peacefully, just like this one, but no matter what we do to forestall it, a war happens."

The room went silent for a moment.

"We haven't been looping too long, but we've tried a lot of things," Roll continued for him. "The closest we've come to succeeding was becoming villains ourselves, which ended up causing our normal villain to be the hero. Sometimes we join forces against a larger threat, but then it's back to business as usual with us on one side and him on the other. The one time that someone, not us mind you, killed him before he could start his bids for world conquest the situation ended up *worse* ."

"Uh, if you don't mind me asking, who–?" Twilight cut her question off when the siblings shook their heads in unison.

"Not telling," Rock stated with finality. "Just in case it doesn't happen this time. We don't want to end up tainting your opinion of him and inadvertently causing it anyway."

That... made a lot of sense actually.

"What we're getting at," Roll picked up, "is that we're starting to think something about our Loop is setting things up so that conflict is inevitable. The initial cause has ranged from perceived slights, to well-intentioned extremism, to accidents that induce madness, to the individual in question having been secretly evil the whole time. Our Loop is pretty messed up on top of it too, with bugs, viruses, and a pretty corrupted baseline. So there's often no indication of which way events are going to go either. Some threats come and go between Loops, and every so often something bizarre crawls out of the variants."

"And in every single one," Rock intoned gravely, "at least one of us has had to fight."

"Wait," Spike interrupted. "Which one of you is the Anchor again?"

"Um... both of us, actually," Rock admitted sheepishly.

"You're Co-Anchors?" Spike inquired.

"Not exactly," Roll shook her head. "We're not... 'soul-bonded' or whatever Hephaestus – he's our admin – called it. He says we're 'Joint Anchors', or that we jointly share the position while not being otherwise connected. We understand it's not exactly common."

"Goodness, no!" Rarity twittered. "Why, I've never heard of such a thing!"

"Yeah, the Crash from a while back musta hit yer place pretty hard, huh?" Applejack contributed.

No one missed the double wince from the two visiting loopers when that was mentioned.

"Wait..." Twilight's face scrunched up as she thought before widening her eyes in revelation. "You...?"

"Yeah," Rock admitted heavily, "our Loop is sort of responsible for what everyone calls 'The Crash'. Lucky us, we got chained to front row seats for the event."

"I..." Twilight's mouth worked up and down in shock. Sure, she'd expected to eventually meet whoever was from that Loop where trying to get it online caused the arguably worst event in the history of the Loops, but having them here in front of her...

"Wow, um..." Spike wasn't having any better luck. After all, it couldn't have been their fault. Yggdrasil wouldn't start anyone looping who had a part in destroying an entire reality, so they were just as much victims as the Loop that was lost.

Pinkie's hair had started to go a bit straight as she teared up in response to the revelation and Fluttershy had somehow gotten even more quiet than usual as she sniffled silently.

"...gosh," Applejack tried and failed to offer something. What did you say in a situation like this? "That's..."

"My word," Rarity managed to recover first. "And you witnessed the whole thing?"

'Wait a second,' Twilight's brain latched on to that particular tidbit as the siblings nodded in response to Rarity's question. "You *remember* it?! You... You actually have memories of the Anchor who was lost?! Then you could..."

She trailed off at the dual shaking heads.

"All we remember about them," Rock told them, "is a hole in space where a person should have been."

"Hephaestus told us recently that he's been examining our memories for any data that could aid the possible recovery of the branch they lost," Roll continued, "but..."

The room got quiet again for a bit, and then Pinkie sprang up suddenly.

"No!" the pink party pony declared forcefully. "No more moping on sad stuff we can't change! We have new friends to get to know, stories to tell, and games to play! Oh, and we have to get ready for Nightmare Moon showing up at what would otherwise be dawn to try and cast everything into eternal darkness. You know, business as usual."

Rock and Roll blinked and looked at each other before turning back to the ponies and dragon.

"Are you *sure* this sanctuary thing of yours works?" they asked in unison.

"It's done pretty well so far," Fluttershy smiled serenely.

Save for Rock and Roll insisting on accompanying them for the adventure, the whole thing with Nightmare Moon had gone pretty

darn close to baseline. In deference to giving their visiting loopers the 'Equestrian Experience', Spike had volunteered to sit out as an Element of Loyalty and allow the local Rainbow Dash variant to fill her usual role.

The interactions between everyone had been rather enlightening. Their visitors clearly had Loop history with Unawake Rainbow Dash, and had asked her if she'd heard from their older brother lately. Apparently Blues had been convinced to keep in touch with the daredevil pegasus even after his estrangement, and that managed to intrigue Applejack enough to get into a conversation with Dash about the mysterious member of the Light family. Roll had then gravitated to Rarity and Fluttershy and the three had gabbed away on the trek about animals, fashion, housekeeping tips, and medicine of all things. Rock had proved to be quite the intellectual, clearly taking after his father, and he and Twilight had gotten along like paper and ink. Interestingly, he also seemed to take to Pinkie Pie pretty well. He was far less random than the premier party pony, but Twilight could tell that like her hyperactive friend, Rock was somepony who genuinely desired to see everyone happy.

Heck, Twilight had even felt some resonance between the two and some of the Elements as they were activated and bonded to her and her friends like in the baseline. It was something that might bear looking into at a later time.

But for now they had a 'Welcome back' party to attend for Luna. And she had a mysterious orb that had been formed when Luna was purified of Nightmare Moon that felt really darn familiar for some reason to examine later.

"What doth rocks and rolling have to do with music?" an Unawake Luna asked of the twin earth ponies. Twilight had to marvel again at how quickly the two had gotten Luna down to a normal speaking volume.

In reply, the two grinned and called out to a nearby Ponyville resident. "Hey Vinyl! You got the karaoke machine hooked up yet?

We need to introduce Princess Luna to our namesake!"

"All ready!" the DJ in mirrored shades piped back, gesturing the two onto an impromptu stage.

"What is this... karaoke?" Luna puzzled as the siblings began to sing.

"Dad likes that old time rock and roll!

The kinda music just soothes the soul!"

"Doctor Bright Light, your majesty," the bearded labcoat-wearing earth pony inventor introduced himself to Princess Luna. "And may I say you dance divinely."

"We thank you, good sir," Luna blushed. She had no idea what had possessed her to get up on stage and dance beside this stallion's children. It was just... that music... It called to her.

"And this is my good friend and partner, Doctor Wily Plan," the white-maned earth pony introduced his frizzy gray-maned and mustachioed earth pony companion, also in a labcoat.

"A pleasure to meet you Princess!" the other pony inventor gushed. "May I say that I have always loved your night sky!"

"Hail and well met!" Luna greeted the scientist. "It pleases us greatly to know how well ponies have taken to intellectual pursuits these days! We have heard tell of the many marvels you both have produced and we would like to hear more!"

"Well, if you don't mind staying until tomorrow," Dr. Light enticed, "you can witness the unveiling of our latest inventions."

"We would be honored, good sirs!"

"Mares and gentlestallions," Dr. Light proclaimed from the podium as a curtain rose, (5) "I present to you the latest invention from the minds at Light Labs, the robot masters!"

Upon the stage stood six robot ponies of various types.

"To oversee forestry management and logging excursions, DLN-003 Cut Mare!"

An orange and white earth pony model with a pair of scissors atop her head jumped off the stage and threw the scissors at an unwieldy log set aside for demonstration purposes. In moments the limbs had been sheared off and the log neatly quartered.

"I also do some mane-styling in my spare time," the robot winked at the impressed crowd.

"For construction, particularly in hazardous conditions, DLN-004 Guts Stallion!"

A truly massive earth-pony model, standing a bit taller than even Celestia, lumbered down off the stage and picked up an I-Beam as easily as a normal pony might heft a baseball bat.

"Built strong to build strong!" the robot rumbled in a deep baritone that complemented the crowd's applause.

"Built for arctic and cold climate exploration, DLN-005, Ice Mare!"

A short pegasus model in a stereotypical parka flew over not to the demonstration area, but to a table of refreshments holding so-far untouched cups of warm lemonade. She then blew a mist over the cups, turning them frosty in an instant.

"I'm also built for cold storage capacity," she smiled as the refreshment table was suddenly swarmed.

"For demolitions and excavation, DLN-006, Bomb Stallion!"

A portly unicorn model bounded to the other side of the stage to a new demonstration area where a shack had been hastily constructed the other day. The robot then whooped as he conjured some explosives and tossed them into the shack. A moment later and all the walls and supports were blown out, leaving the fully intact roof to fall straight down.

"So," Applejack whispered to Twilight as the crowd applauded loudly at the display of precision control, "ya think introducing him ta Trixie would be a good idea or a bad-un?"

"I *love* my job!" the robot cheered.

"Bad," Twilight whispered back, "definitely bad. Doesn't matter that she's not Awake."

"For waste management, DLN-007, Fire Mare!"

"Hey, look, it's you when you're angry," Pinkie grinned at Twilight as the second unicorn model suddenly produced a flaming mane as she strode over to the second demonstration area. The female robot stared at the debris for a moment before rearing up and blasting flames from her forehooves that reduced the debris to ash.

"No muss," the robot drawled much like Applejack tended to as the reporters' cameras flashed even faster, "no fuss."

"And finally, to rewrite the book on Equestria's growing need for power management, DLN-008, Elec Mare!"

The final pegasus model strode to the front of the stage and spread her wings. Arcs of lightning emanated from her and suddenly the perimeter of the stage was lit up with previously unnoticed lights like Hearth's Warming Eve.

"I knew you'd get a charge out of me!" the robot declared to enthusiastic cheers as a set of pyrotechnics went off along the stage's edge.

"Oh, dear," Rarity giggled demurely. "It's a robot Rainbow Dash. How ever shall we cope?"

"Guess we'll have to practice ducking and covering," Spike shrugged.

"Oh, you'll help me practice, won't you Spike?" Rarity fluttered her eyelashes.

"Get a room you two," Twilight groused.

"Pardon us, master Light," Luna spoke up from where she and her sister sat observing the unveiling, causing the crowd to quiet down. "We know we have been gone from Equestria for a... long time, but surely ponies still begin their counting with the number 'one', do they not? Whither art the first two of thine creations?"

"An excellent question your majesty," Dr. Light beamed, "and one I'm afraid I must let somepony else answer."

With that, Dr. Light beckoned towards backstage, and his two children stepped out to stand before the now confused crowd.

"Hello everyone!" Rock waved cheerfully. "I'm DLN-001, dad's tool-using lab assistant."

"And I'm DLN-002," Roll curtsied before the slack-jawed audience, "housekeeper, and the one who makes sure this motley group of goofs takes proper care of themselves."

"Yeah," Rock rubbed his mane sheepishly, "she's good at that."

"YOU'RE ROBOTS?!" somepony yelled incredulously. *'Huh. Well that explains a lot. They're certainly a lot more life-like in appearance than Silver ended up,'* Twilight thought as she looked around for who had yelled. It took her a moment and seeing half the crowd looking straight at her to realize she'd been the one who'd yelled it. *'I'm going to need to put a leash on my subconscious this Loop, aren't I?'*

"YES!" a butter-yellow pegasus elated as she involuntarily rose into the air. Fluttershy suddenly realized what she'd done and floated back down, blushing the whole way, but still clearly excited. "I won the pot!"

"Awww," Twilight heard Lyra pout nearby, "I was sure they were humans in disguise!"

"Oh, dear!" Rarity fanned herself dramatically, "My money was on them being his illegitimate children by a summer love he met while on an exotic vacation!"

"I think I had mine on them having stayed with another member of the family until their dad got himself properly set up with his business here," Applejack sighed.

Twilight spotted Rainbow Dash rolling on the ground and laughing as more and more ludicrous disproven theories about the origins of Dr. Light's children were passed around. At least she hadn't been the only one fooled, even among her looping friends. Then again, none of them had exactly checked their magical signature or anything.

"Truly, your children are a marvel of ingenuity," Luna could be heard complementing the good doctor.

"I'm just happy to have them in my life," Dr. Light smiled back while his son and daughter fielded a deluge of questions from the gathered reporters like pros.

Later after the unveiling, Twilight managed to track down Dr. Light and show him the strange orb that had been dropped when Luna was cleansed of Nightmare Moon. Dr. Wily had passed through earlier looking typically sour of him, but she and Dr. Light were too engrossed in studying the object to pay him any mind.

"My goodness, this is extraordinary," Dr. Light proclaimed fervently as he took readings. "It's clearly a power source, but I can see

mental patterns inherent in it as well!"

"You mean, that's a pony in there?" Twilight blinked.

"Or some other sapient race," Dr. Light clarified. "Perhaps even one we've never encountered before. We'd have to give it a body capable of communicating with us to know for sure. Would you like to learn how?"

"Me? *You* want to show *me* how to build a robot like Rock and Roll?" Twilight blinked, feeling her fanfilly tendencies rising and trying to stamp them out before they embarrassed her again.

It was harder than it sounded. Especially since she was starting to get an idea of why the orb had felt familiar, which meant her maternal instincts were backing up her fanfilly tendencies.

"I managed to help my adopted daughter build her friend Silver," the roboticist smiled, "so it shouldn't be too difficult to teach somepony of your clear capability."

"Yes!" she cheered and began bouncing around the room. "Yesyesyesyesyesyes!"

She was gonna have her daughter around for the Loop! Wheeee!

The positive atmosphere of the previous day seemed so far away now, Twilight mused. Ponyville wasn't feeling the effects directly, but they'd gotten the news on the televised news broadcast the doctors' technomagical advances had allowed to become widespread.

The events they were showing were not heartening. For some unfathomable reason Dr. Wily had stolen the six robot masters and used them to commandeer robots in the techno-savvy city of Manehattan and hold the entire metropolitan area hostage. He was demanding... actually he was sounding a lot like Nightmare Moon

come to think of it. Lots of jealousy, some legitimate, some sorely misplaced, and all blown *way* out of proportion.

The princesses apparently had their hooves full trying to calm a panicking populace to give the situation their full attention and the guard had already been defeated trying to take the city back. No fatalities yet, and Dr. Wily's forces actually seemed to be taking care to incapacitate rather than kill. Currently, Shining Armor was using his barrier spell to contain the hostile forces inside Manehattan, which was taking up all his concentration.

And Dr. Light had just nixed the proposal to use the Elements of Harmony.

"The Elements might work on Dr. Wily, perhaps," the stallion lamented, "but we have no idea if they will have any effect at all on robots. You would all be put in grave danger if they failed, and Wily would likely gain control of the Elements as a result, and who knows what he could do with such artifacts in his madness?"

Twilight thought back to the baseline incident with Sunset Shimmer and concluded that such a thing could be very bad indeed. She was debating ascending to take care of the problem when Rock and Roll stepped forward and determinedly asked to be converted into fighting robots. In deference to the fact that they clearly seemed to know what they were doing, Twilight decided to let them handle things for now. But if it became necessary, she would step in.

Twilight and Dash were both tapped to help with the conversion while the rest of the looping Elements looked on silently, understanding that this was something their visitors did regularly and respecting their decision. The two armored figures stepped out of the final conversion capsules looking every inch the heroes they clearly were used to being.

"I built the two of you as Rock and Roll, after my love of music," Dr. Light smiled sadly as he looked upon the results of his efforts, "you are something very different now."

"You said the hoof-cannons you gave us are called 'Mega Busters', right?" Rock asked.

"Well then you can call us Mega Stallion and Mega Mare!" Roll finished.

Twilight felt like facehooving at the ponified title of a popular video game series from the Hub. *That's* why their names sounded familiar!

My Mega Pony, My Mega Pony,

Ahh ahh ahh ahhh ahhhhhhhh~~~

My Mega Pony,

I used to wonder what robots could mean,

To a world that's all so serene.

Hooves of Iron.

Tails of Steel.

But with a heart that's kindly and real.

Those corrupted,

They'll defeat!

They won't stop till they have ol' Wily beat!

You have My Mega Pony,

Do you know you're all my mechanical Friends. (*)

Rainbow Dash went through her routine for the upcoming Best Young Flyer competition for the umpteenth time. Who'd have thought

so much would happen in such a short time?

Right after Nightmare Moon was beaten, old Doc Wily had gone nutzoid a lot like Luna had a thousand years ago and hijacked a whole city. A *city* ! According to Twilight, when Luna went Nightmare Moon a thousand years ago, she'd just gone after her sister and busted up their old place in the Everfree. And because he was using robots to hold everyone hostage, no one could be sure the Elements would work as advertised.

So Doc Light's robo-kids had stepped up to the plate and turned themselves into freaking superheroes! They'd marched right into the city and saved everypony! Yeah, they came out a little banged up, but they did it with the fully-restored-to-their-right-minds robot masters marching right out with them, Doc Wily in hoofcuffs, and not one flesh-and-blood pony injured. Not even Doc Wily. Holy *snap* .

What really blew her mind was just how life in Ponyville managed to continue like it was all no big deal. Gilda had dropped by in a visit that had nearly set her old friend and her new ones at each others throats, and she still had no idea how that sorted itself out. Applejack had nearly killed herself trying to pull in the whole harvest solo, and, oh yeah, they all had tickets for the upcoming *Grand Galloping Gala* !

If only she could get this darned routine to go the way she wanted it. The competition wasn't that far off!

"Still having trouble with the Sonic Rainboom, are you?" a familiar voice cut into her thoughts.

Rainbow whipped around to see a familiar gray-coated earth pony stallion with a cutie mark of a shield superimposed over a sword. His brown mane was styled into a pompadour that would have looked ridiculous on *any* pony else, but he managed to make look awesome. With the ever-present shades and his trademark yellow scarf, he was quite the welcome sight.

"Hey Blues!" she greeted Doc Light's wayward son and runaway prototype cheerfully. "How's life been treating ya?"

"So," Rock collected his thoughts, "this Trixie character tends to come in, boast about some feat she doesn't even realize the true scope of, challenge everyone that she can beat them at their own special talent, and all because she's convinced it's the best stage persona she could use?"

"Pretty much," Twilight nodded. "And after alienating half the town by humiliating them onstage, a pair of impressionable colts get it into their heads to go into the Everfree and wake up an ursa minor so they can see the impossible feat for themselves. And since I like Ponyville un-stomped I try to head that off if I can, usually by nudging her in a more productive direction. And it's 'everypony', not 'everyone'."

"Dad programmed us for political correctness in regards to the myriad of sapient species that inhabit the world. That's my story and I'm sticking to it," Rock insisted. "Wait a second. This Trixie is an over-the-top ham, right?"

"Every time I've met her," Twilight agreed. "Why?"

"Has anyone seen Auto?"

"Oh," Twilight blinked as she recalled the goofy stallion-bot who ran Light Lab's storefront and mechanic shop in town. The hammy robot who liked to build ridiculous over-the-top contraptions in his spare time. "Oh, dear."

"No, Dash," Blues sighed, "I'm saying that you being naturally suspicious is *part* of what makes you such a good fit for the Element of Loyalty. Some might say that the opposite of loyalty would be betrayal, but that's along antithetical lines. Suspicion is the opposite

along complementary lines. You've heard of the Yin-Yang theory, right?"

"Duh," Dash rolled her eyes. "It's part of my martial arts classes. The whole 'everything in balance' thing."

"And 'balance' is synonymous with 'Harmony'," Blues completed the thought. "The Elements couldn't work with ponies that embodied only positive traits, because that's not very harmonious, is it? Like night balances day, there needs to be a shadow aspect that balances the light. Suspicion is the logical shadow aspect of Loyalty. Because you are loyal to your circle of friends and the community at large, you are suspicious of anything that might jeopardize them."

Dash was quiet as she mulled that over while the two walked into town. Huh, it looked like there was a show or something getting started.

"The same should be true of the others," the rogue prototype continued. "Honesty works along with Deception, for to uncover truths one must grasp how they can be hidden. To be truly honest, one needs understand the ways in which they can be dishonest. This is especially true in the matters of *self* -deception."

"I dunno..." Dash hedged doubtfully.

"Plus you'd be surprised how easy it is to deceive some with nothing but honesty," Blues smirked. "As for the others, like many parents show Kindness to their children, they also display great Ferocity in their defense. Generosity often goes hoof in hoof with Ambition, for one must *have* before one can *give* . Laughter connects with others in order to spread joy, which opens the possibility for great Sorrow when those connections are severed."

"And what about Magic, smart guy?" the stunt pegasus and part-time lab assistant challenged. "Magic's not exactly a personality trait, is it?"

"You'd think that," Blues smirked, "but you'd be wrong. The secret lies in the origins of the word. Long before Celestia or Luna, there was an order of unicorns known as the Magi. They were the ones who moved the sun and moon and turned the seasons, and none outside the order understood their secrets. The secret knowledge of the Magi came to be known as 'magic' long before even other unicorns referred to the effects generated through their horns as such. The Magi were the only ones in those days that could be called scholars, and in a time when few others could even be considered educated. They were the seekers of knowledge, and the ones who always seemed to know what to do when mysterious events occurred. That is what 'Magic' is: Things the Magi know."

"Wow," Dash blinked. "Yeah, that's Twilight all over. How do you know stuff like this? I thought you were, ya know, developed for the Royal Guard."

"You don't honestly think my father would program a potential son without a thirst for intellectual pursuits, did you?" Blues returned flatly.

"No," Dash rubbed her head sheepishly. "You're still not gonna talk with him are you? Look, I know whatever it was that happened between you two probably *sounded* bad, but–"

"Not..." Blues interrupted her. "Not yet. I'm not ready. But... thanks for not giving up anyway."

"No problem," Dash smiled as the two inserted themselves into the crowd around the traveling stage, even as she cursed the stubbornness of Doc Light's eldest son.

"Well then, Trixie hereby challenges you, Ponyvillians," an Unawake Trixie dared the crowd. "Anything you can do, the Great and Powerful Trixie can do better. Any takers?"

"I'll take that challenge!" a portly metal and mostly-green stallion with large red bubble-shaped eyes, a literally square jaw, and a large bolt in the top of his head declared as he jumped up on the stage and dramatically opened a paper fan designed like Equestria's flag while pointing at the showmare. "Auto is in da hooooouusse!" (6)

"Okay," Twilight facehooved. "The good news is that I think we've avoided the Ursa Minor incident. The bad news is that your friend still managed to destroy Trixie's stage and damage the town."

"Yeah," Rock winced as he surveyed the damage caused by Auto's last one-up on Trixie. That had escalated a lot faster than he'd been prepared for. "Sorry about that."

"And seriously, *when* did he convert the shop into a pseudo-mecha?" Twilight asked. *How* would be a good question too. No one in Ponyville had noticed him doing it. Though perhaps the renovations turning the store front into a giant replica of the upper portion of Dr. Light's mobile suitcase Eddie should have been a clue that Auto was up to something wacky.

"He's native to my Loop, not Awake, and I'm *still* trying to figure him out," Rock shook his head as he stepped up to offer his help rebuilding Trixie's wagon-stage. After moving 'Big Eddie's' hydraulic foot off of it. Maybe he should just offer to have Light Labs invent her a whole new one.

And he also needed to rescue Auto from the enraged showmare's assault. Maybe.

Things had been going more-or-less according to the general 'Equestrian Experience' plan she'd put together for visiting loopers since the capture of Dr. Wily. In essence, the plan involved the Awake Elements sticking relatively close to the baseline while doing their best to minimize collateral damage.

But a few derailments were to be expected. For example: Fluttershy had gotten praise for her 'new level in badflank' from the Unawake Rainbow Dash during the snoring dragon incident.

A big one was how the Gala tickets had proceeded. Both Applejack and Pinkie Pie had convinced the Apples and Cakes to put in catering bids which had netted both business and complimentary tickets. Furthermore, Light Labs had such celebrity status that they'd apparently been down for Gala invitations since before the Loop began. Dr. Light was still getting over the betrayal by his friend and colleague, and so had gifted both his and Wily's tickets to Spike (who he'd never known as a 'baby' dragon) and Rarity. Rock and Roll, and even Dash, in her capacity as part-time assistant, had gotten tickets as well. Which left no problems with Twilight letting Fluttershy have her extra. It was rather interesting how well it all worked out to be honest.

Then there was the parasprite incident. They'd been hashing out how to handle it without damaging Ponyville, or just skipping it altogether, when the reports came in that parasprites were *already* loose in the town.

Apparently it was Auto's fault (big surprise, the bot was like a mad scientist/Pinkie-lite/Trixie-ham/fan colt mish-mash at times) and they'd quietly agreed not to use any quick-fixes. The nutty mechanic needed to learn that his actions had consequences.

The mad scramble for instruments had been harder than they recalled though. They'd forgotten how difficult fighting their way through panicked Ponyvillians could be at times, but in the end they'd gotten the swarm back into the Everfree with minimal overall damage and a deal with Dr. Light to let him study one under controlled conditions to see if non-musical countermeasures could be developed.

And then Celestia had shown up early for her scheduled visit, surprising the heck out of Twilight. Differences like that didn't tend to be innocuous.

"Hello, Princess," she greeted. "You're early. I'm afraid we aren't quite ready to receive you properly."

"As much as I wish this visit was social, my pupil," Celestia replied, all business, "I'm afraid my visit will need to be cancelled. I am stopping by to give you warning of a matter most grave before I return to emergency duties."

"What matter?" Twilight asked, getting a sinking feeling.

"Dr. Wily has escaped custody and is currently loose in Equestria."

"You don't seem all that surprised," Twilight observed how the two visiting loopers were taking the news.

"We really aren't," Roll shrugged. "We've discussed trying to convince someone to send Wily to the moon, with enough supplies to build a self-sustaining habitation for one of course, but we're pretty sure he'd come back in a lunar-built skull cruiser or something. There just isn't any prison we've come across that can hold him indefinitely."

"Is something wrong, Silver?" Scootaloo asked her currently mechanical friend who seemed to be crying. Or at least as good an imitation as her body allowed for.

"No, it's nothing," Silver insisted. "It's just–"

You're not even a real pony!

I am so! I even have my own cutie mark!

And it's just as fake as the rest of you! Fake pony! Fake pony!

"It's Diamond Tiara," Silver sighed. "She... How did you three ever put up with us?!"

"We kinda didn't," Scootaloo admitted. "Not in the baseline, and not when we were new loopers. It took us all a bunch of Loops before we managed to mature enough to deal with it. And not being your friends kinda helped with not taking it personally I guess. I can't imagine how hard it must be for you since, you know..."

"I kinda wish I couldn't either," Silver Spoon sighed. "I had a hard time getting used to the 'new' Diamond at first, but I think we're closer now than we ever were. Closer than our baselines ever *could* have been, I think. And it hurts because I know now how awesome my best friend can be and I have to watch this stubborn, petty, little *rrrggh...* just waste her potential! How the *leaf* did you three manage to get through to her again?!"

"It was all Applebloom, remember?" Scootaloo reminded Silver. "They told you how Discord stranded them together on a desert island, 'Bloom had already taken all her useful stuff outta her subspace pocket and decided not to use her looping abilities so it would be fair to DT meaning they'd starve if they didn't work together."

"Sorry," Silver moped. "I just keep hoping that something less... life threatening could work."

"Well..." Scootaloo rubbed her chin, "You know how she likes to suck up to her dad's rich business partners, right?"

"Of course," Silver sniffed. "How do you think we knew each other originally?"

Scootaloo shrugged the retort off before replying. "Well, 'poppa Light' runs a pretty successful business..."

Silver blinked and began to grin as wide as her metal face would allow as a plan began to come together.

"Looking good, Dash," Roll grinned seeing the nervous pegasus in the gala dress Rarity had designed for her.

"Seriously?" Dash questioned, looking uncomfortable. "I was kind of imagining something..."

"20% cooler?" Roll and Rarity deadpanned together.

"Ah-heh..." Dash rubbed the back of her head sheepishly.

"Rainbow Dash," Rarity admonished, "I have seen what you would consider 'cool' and it is not proper gala wear!"

"Besides," Roll added, "with the laced sandals and the laurel wreath, you look like you just stepped out of the winner's circle from the ancient Equestrian Games."

Dash blinked as that sunk in and turned to look herself over in the mirror again, striking a few 'victory' poses. "You really think so?"

" *Do* give me some credit, dear," Rarity sniffed. "I do not merely design fabulosity in this shop, I also match that fabulosity to the personality of the intended wearer and you are nothing if not an athlete. To suggest that I would allow anything unsuited to that trait to grace your frame," *'at least when I'm not deliberately embarrassing you for a prank,'* she added silently, "is an insult to my profession."

"Yeah, well..." Dash fished for something to redirect the conversation, "what about Roll's dress? Not a whole lot to that one."

"Miss Roll is a very simple mare," Rarity huffed. "Excessive adornment just does not suit her. And red is quite her color, would you not agree?"

Indeed, Roll was currently modeling what could be termed a stereotypical 'little red dress' were it not for the subtle circuitry highlights that shimmered when the light hit them just right.

"I am more curious as to who the stallion is you requested the suit for," Rarity decided to strike back.

"Dash!" Roll declared with acute interest. "Do you have a *date* ? Who is it? Where did you meet them?"

"And *how* did you come by the extra ticket, dear?" Rarity inserted.

"Whoa!" Dash backed up from the sudden assault. "He's just an old friend! No one you'd know," *'and I'm trying to fix that, stubborn Blues...'* she cursed mentally, "and the lab got an extra ticket for some reason! Honest!" (7)

"Hmmm... yes," Dr. Light mused at the idea his adopted daughter and her friend Silver had suggested. "A business arrangement with Mr. Rich could be quite the boon for Light Labs if done properly. I'll see about making an appointment after Twilight and I finish up here."

"Thanks dad!" Scootaloo and Silver chirped as they raced back out.

"Ah, to be young again," Dr. Light chuckled as he turned back to the project he was helping Celestia's prized student put together. Had the filly not insisted on making such a complex model, they'd have already been done. But he'd been so intrigued by the prospect of making a properly functioning alicorn model that he'd let himself be talked into it. Why, the advances they'd made in cross-race magical conversion just to get this one robot working the way it needed to *alone* ...

"Focus doctor," Twilight's voice cut through his musings. Ah, how far she'd come from the hero-worship she'd started with. But familiarity and the informal air they strove to create around the lab had a way of tempering such things.

"Yes, of course," he replied. They were in the most delicate final stage, the connecting of the strange orb that the mystical discharge the cleansing of Nightmare Moon from Luna had produced to the

robot body's processors. Done properly, the orb should function like an IC chip. "Okay, you should connect the thaumic actuators to the..."

Twilight worked as the good doctor gave general directions. He'd shown her how to build and connect everything, but the one who had done all the physical work on this robot was Twilight herself. This was to be *her* child after all, not his.

Save for the race model difference, the body was like Silver Spoon's, a metal filly with the capacity for later updating to a more mature model. Scootaloo may have wanted a friend her own age back then, but he knew she'd want that friend to grow with her eventually.

He watched as Twilight made the last connection and closed the outer shell while the systems booted up for the first time. The robot filly blinked and looked around in confusion before fixing her gaze on Twilight.

"Momma?" the robot filly asked confusedly. "Where did I Wake Up?"

'Interesting inflection on that question,' Dr. Light mused. Apparently Twilight's handling of the orb had created some manner of imprinting. No sign of the corruption Nightmare Moon was known for, thank goodness, and the robot filly hadn't even needed to be told who had built her. Absolutely fascinating.

"Right where you were supposed to, Nyx," Twilight's eyes watered before she enveloped the so-named mechanical filly in a hug. (8)

Dr. Light promptly decided that this was a private moment and proceeded to make himself scarce.

'Okay Dash,' the pegasus mare psyched herself up, *'you've got this. So, maybe you've been having some trouble doing a Sonic Rainboom on command, but everything else you've got down pat. So what if your old classmates from Flight School are still jerks? So*

what if half of Cloudsdale's still giving you dirty looks because you helped some smart guys break the weather monopoly? So what if Rarity just wowed everyone with that flutterwing spell Twilight cast on her? So what if Roll's debuting the pegasus harness right after your turn? It's like Doc Light said, no matter what you try to do, there will be ponies right there telling you you can't. If you really want to be the best no one's going to just hand you the title. You gotta make them believe you deserve it.'

She stepped out to cheers from some, boos from others but let it all wash over her. Her only focus was on her routine. Nothing else mattered.

And it went amazingly. The shifts and turns were perfect. The crowd oohed and aahed in all the right places. She could tell that even her detractors were impressed. And then it all went south.

The blast of wind had come out of nowhere and ploughed her straight into the stands. Her head was ringing when she heard a trio of impacts hit near her while she extracted herself.

"I'll let that one slide," an unfamiliar voice boomed over the stadium, "but if any one other than the Mega Mane or Mega Mare step forward then my seven brothers and their armies will destroy the areas they control."

"Oh Celestia!" a stallion was panicking near her. "My buds! They tried to catch Spitfire and got knocked off! They're not flying! Help!"

Dash didn't even think twice. A quick glance around showed the other Wonderbolts weren't conscious enough to make the rescue, so she opted to go after the falling ponies instead. She leapt off the stands and rocketed downwards towards the three as fast as she could, but the lead they had was too far for her to make it at subsonic speeds.

She pushed harder and harder as she heard Roll fight against the attacker and the familiar barrier of air formed in front of her.

"You cannot defeat Air Tercel!" (9) boomed the attacker above as she struggled against the air resistance, desperately trying for more speed. Three ponies' lives were counting on her, and Rainbow Dash didn't let others down if she could help it.

BOOM

And suddenly the resistance was gone. She'd broken the barrier, but she didn't have time to celebrate as she grabbed the three unconscious pegasi and began to pull up as sharply as she dared to avoid the ground.

Whew. They were safe and she even had enough momentum going to get them back up to Cloudsdale. On the way back up, she passed the falling body of a buff blue metal griffon with a huge fan in its torso and shortly after she was depositing a recovering Spitfire and two familiar stallions on the clouds.

Of course it would be Hoops and Score that she just saved. Along with their aptly named pal Dumb-Bell, they were the worst bullies in all of Cloudsdale. But... she had to be honest. She'd have gone after them even if she'd known. They were jerks, but they didn't deserve to die for it.

"Miss Dash!" some reporter shoved a microphone in her face out of nowhere. "Is it true that the power of friendship is what allowed you to do a Sonic Rainboom?"

"Huh?" Dash blinked. Where the hay did they get that idea? "No. I mean, Spitfire's my idol, but we're not friends."

"Is it true that you're in an illicit three-way relationship with the two stallions you saved?" the reporter didn't even seem to have heard her.

"Like *buck* !" she yelled loud enough to bowl the idiot over. "I hate these jerks! They're my worst enemies short of Doc Wily!"

"Then, why did you save them?" someone else asked. Dash blinked and seriously considered the question for a moment.

"Because if working at Light Labs has taught me anything, it's that we're here to help *everypony* ," she told the more reasonable pony, "not just those we like. And, yeah, you can quote me on that."

"Blast it," Rock muttered in the stands as the commotion started to die down, though not quietly enough for Twilight to miss overhearing.

"What?" she asked curiously.

"You heard Air Tercel before Roll engaged him, didn't you?" Rock began rhetorically. "How he referred to me as 'Mega Mane' instead of 'Mega Stallion'?"

"Yeah," Twilight mused. "That was odd... It's inaccurate of course, but nonetheless closer to your baseline title."

"Which means there's a good chance Dr. Wily's Dreaming again," Rock sighed, before noting Twilight's puzzled expression. "I'll explain later, but right now Roll and I need to go and get the other seven before they get tired of waiting for us and do something we'll all regret."

Roll took cover behind some factory machinery as her opponent blasted fire at her. Of *course* Heat Man's local variant would be dragon-based.

"First Flash Mare, then Crash Mane, and now Heat Drake," Roll muttered as she did her best to avoid damage and find the best opening to retaliate. She and her brother were being led on a scripted series of battles that seemed designed to ensure they got almost all of the master weapons they needed *after* they'd be useful. It was almost like Dr. Wily was daring them to use weapons they couldn't have gotten yet. Yeah, he was definitely Dreaming.

Rock swore as he dodged another timberwolf. He'd taken down Bubble Mare and Quick Mane already, but the local variant of Wood Man had holed up in the Everfree and had taken control of the resident timberwolves. All of them. Or at least what looked like it.

"Attack my loyal pack!" the feral wooden robot growled, "Attack in the name of Wood Alpha!" (10)

'Leave it to Dr. Wily to make the local hostile flora even worse,' Rock cursed as he blasted a few more of the wooden wolves and tried to get a bead on their leader. He stopped as he spotted movement from the defeated timberwolves. Were they *reforming* ?

Dr. Light was helping direct his son and daughter's movements, with the enthusiastic aid of the Elements of Harmony, when a proximity alert went off. As more of the interior defenses, a necessary precaution since his former partner's attempts to conquer Equestria, went offline, he tapped a few buttons on the console.

And then the door to the room was cut from its frame.

"Hello doc, ladies," the robot that strode in greeted with sinister cheerfulness. His armor was patterned in red, yellow, and black with saw blades in the place of his mane. He formed a circular sawblade in a slot on each forehoof and set them spinning ominously. "Now if you all would back away from that computer nice and slow, you can all get out of this with your limbs still attached."

Rarity stepped forward, scowling. "Now see here, you–"

The blade that launched at her from the robot's hoof came so fast and sudden that Twilight almost didn't get a shield up in time. She'd later realize that the trajectory was a warning shot meant to leave her fashionista friend with a bad mane-cut and possibly short an ear, but not dead. And in the end, she needn't have bothered, because

the blade was intercepted by a glob of liquid adhesive and pasted harmlessly against the wall.

"Who are you?" the invading robot asked the one who'd intercepted his shot.

An orange and black robot pony with a head that looked like a paste dispenser stepped in and stared at the invader. "DLN-009: Bond Mane," he declared.

"What a coincidence," the invading robot glared back, "I'm D *W* N-009: Metal Mane."

"And then the nasty robot was all like 'grr! I'm gonna cut ya up'!" Pinkie related as Rock and Roll both listened over the communications channel, "and Bond Mane was all like 'not on my watch pardner'! They fought like kung fu ninjas back and forth, trashing everything in sight for miles and–"

"Actually, Bond Mane blasted Metal Mane with some hefty adhesive and left him plastered against the wall," Twilight interrupted, rolling her eyes. "Your dad immediately disabled his communicator and mobility, but he's still otherwise functional."

"Good," Rock replied over the com. "We're coming back to get his data and correlate it with the rest so we can find out where Wily's holed up."

Twilight watched as Rock and Roll in their 'Mega Pony' armor bumped hooves before entering the lab. It was interesting how little fanfare occurred to indicate what she knew was happening when they did that. The ability to scan and download information from a subject so thoroughly by just *touch* ...

The looping student of Celestia stamped down her rising fanfillying. This was *not* the time.

Think about something else... Like how they made use of the long distance teleport network Light Labs had set up to transport non-biological items and was even now being refined so it could be used on *living* subjects...

'Down girl,' she ordered her Loop-memory subconscious. The two robot heroes were talking with Dr. Light. Apparently their shared data just needed one more piece to be complete and allow them to track where Dr. Wily had gone. The piece Metal Mane had.

As one, the two robot ponies went over and touched Wily's robot, and then everything went to Tartarus.

SERVE WILY!

Rock recoiled as dark electric arcs ran over his and his sister's systems alike. This was even worse than that malware Dr. Wily had snuck into the second set of robot masters in the baseline. He thought there might even be a mystical aspect to it...

OBEY WILY!

It was only their long experience with fighting off reprogramming and other forms of mind control that meant they weren't rushing to fulfill Dr. Wily's bidding right now. As it was, it was taking everything they had just to remain immobile.

LOVE WILY!

"T-twi...light..." he heard Roll grate out. "Help..."

"Please..." he managed to add.

FOR THE GLORY OF WILY!

The whole lab was frantic when something hit the two after downloading Metal Mane's data. Wily's robot had shut down from the backlash, but the damage was done. Bond Mane had needed to glue both heroes to the wall so they could be examined without risking them harming anypony, and the news was anything but good.

"They're contaminated with an energy similar to that of Nightmare Moon," Dr. Light gave the prognosis to the gathered Elements. "It's really quite insidious. I couldn't tell it was even there until they had all the pieces that Wily placed in each of his robot masters."

"It's different too," Twilight added, all business. "I've been talking with Luna and she likened her corruption to a whisper in the back of her mind so subtle it was hard to differentiate from her own thoughts. One that poked at her insecurities until the dark thoughts it put forth began to sound like good ideas and any other options were obscured by the constant repetition. What they've got is more like a voice screaming at them, making it hard to think period."

"My attempts at developing an anti-virus have failed," Dr. Light admitted. "I am unable to remove this darkness from my children."

"Which means it's up to us, girls," Twilight told her friends. "If we had more time, we could research other methods, but Dr. Wily needs to be stopped now and only these two have the information needed to find him. I've already had Spike send a message to Princess Celestia requesting the use of the Elements of Harmony for this and they should be arriving shortly. Are you ready?"

Five determined nods were her reply.

Rock felt the wave of Harmony wash over him and sweep away the dark pounding in his processors. Later, he would describe it like getting wake-up slapped with a revelation wrapped in a humbling sense of peace and acceptance.

The sudden absence of the dark malware was just as jarring as its activation though, and he slumped where he was pasted to the wall next to his sister. However, a quick assessment of the remaining data had his head whipping right back up.

"I know where Dr. Wily is!" both he and Roll declared together.

Twilight stared at the video feed from the robot heroes showing Wily's Skull Fortress.

"How the hay did nopony *notice* this?!"

"Hahahaha! Feeble Equestrian robots!" Dr. Wily laughed as his form twisted and bent in a manner depressingly familiar to his twin opponents. "You cannot stop me! I possess the power of the stars!"

The room dissolved into an endless night sky as Wily turned from an earth pony into a vaguely pony-like alien form.

"Oh, come on!" Roll shouted in disbelief as she and her brother dodged a beam of energy directed at them. "No way you're really an alien!"

"What you think is of no consequence!" the alien-thing-that-was-supposedly-Wily retorted. "Flee and warn Equestria that I am merely the vanguard! Doom is coming! HAHAHAHAHA!"

Rock ignored the taunting. This kind of thing was old hat for him by now. Roll had agreed to keep Wily-alien busy while he checked the perimeter.

'Good,' he thought as his hoof bumped the wall right where it should be. *'He's still using a hologram for this. Not sure what we're going to do if we ever end up in a variant where Wily really* is *an alien like he keeps trying to claim, but this we can handle.'*

Rock turned his Mega-Buster to where he recalled the field of stars began to appear and fired, ignoring Wily's sudden call for him to stop.

The twin robot pony heroes stood side by side as the hologram faded to reveal a metal room empty save for the control panel the real Wily Plan was operating.

"Er... pay no attention to that pony behind the hologram?" Wily sweated as both Mega Ponies glared at him.

"Dr. Wily," Rock stated, "you're under arrest."

"You have the right to remain silent," Roll continued before Wily slammed a hoof on his control panel.

"Bah!" the mad doctor declared, suddenly energetic. "You fools understand nothing! I am the chosen vanguard! Nightmare Moon was chosen, but she couldn't hack it, and so the stars decided to give the job to a *real* genius! They shall take this world for their own and I shall pave the way! Then none shall be able to deny that I am *truly the greatest!* "

Rock and Roll were so busy parsing this new rant that they almost forgot that Wily often had a secret escape route. They had barely started moving when the doctor dropped through a trap door that closed after him.

"WARNING," a mechanical voice rang out. "SKULL FORTRESS SELF-DESTRUCT IN FIVE MINUTES."

The rant may have pointed to something different going on behind the scenes of this Loop, but the rush to outrun the castle's self-destruct was so familiar by now it could have been done with their optics off.

The reports had been filed, and the two heroes were now resting from their ordeal as they regaled their collected friends, both Awake and not, of their battles.

"And then Ditzy Doo drops right out of the sky and collides with Bubble Mare, smashing them both into a nearby wall," Rock told the gathered ponies. "They both go like this," Rock took a moment to cause his eyes to circle aimlessly and spoke the next line in a falsetto, "'I just don't know what went wrong' before falling unconscious together."

Laughter chorused through the room at Rock's impression.

"All joking aside though, she probably saved my life," Rock continued seriously. "Or at least prevented serious injury. I'm going to set up a tab with Sugarcube Corner to give her free muffins every day in perpetuity as thanks."

"He really said 'the stars' had chosen him?" Twilight asked pointedly once she'd managed to get the two into a more private meeting with only Awake individuals present.

"Not those exact words," Roll clarified, "but yes."

"That's... troubling," Spike mused. "The prophecy of Nightmare Moon said 'the stars shall aid in her escape, but..."

"But it's normally just an alignment of planets and moons and such," Twilight finished for him. "Still, we've had a bunch of variants where 'the stars' were more than that, but there's no real pattern to who or why."

"And Wily's not normally known for working with anyone," Rock added, "much less *for* anyone. The first is a short list that frequently ends in betrayal, and the second is practically nonexistent and has so far never been a case of Wily doing so both willingly and

knowingly. Safe money's on either Wily, 'the stars', or both using the other."

"Could he be infected like Nightmare Moon was?" Rarity asked.

"It's possible," Roll admitted.

"But the fact remains that he hasn't really been acting any different from what we're used to," Rock added. "If he is corrupted by the nightmare, it didn't have to work too hard."

"Which would explain why he went sour so durn fast," Applejack added.

"No more than usual," Rock clarified. "Corrupted or not, neither theory is outside the realm of possibility."

"Okay, that's going nowhere," Twilight cut off debate. "You promised me an explanation on what you meant by Wily 'Dreaming'."

Rock sighed before launching an explanation. "As you know, our branch is pretty damaged. Inconsistent baseline, bugs, viruses, the whole nine yards. There's apparently a relatively stable bug that's occurred in both Dad's and Dr. Wily's Yggdrasil codes that allows them to randomly access memories from previous Loops they existed in. They tend to think of it as deja vu, a flash of brilliance, or premonitions, but they occasionally do things that can only be explained by Loop memories, however partial."

"I've heard of something like that before," Twilight pondered. "A bunch of people in the Loop the Norns spend their time in ended up being able to retain Loop memories by way of consistent exposure to their divine auras, but no trained physical skills like a looper would. At least that's the most plausible theory I came up with. But their memories are much more coherent."

"Well, Wily's has been a recurring headache for us," Roll informed them. "It may be inconsistent, but we've noticed that if we use certain

tactics too much then he prepares for them more often. And then there's the fact that even without Dreaming he's smart enough to improve his inventions to match us if we start off too strong or overcome obstacles too easily."

"It's only going to be a matter of time before the stuff he's learned here ends up in something he makes back home," Rock finished wearily.

"Oh, dear," Fluttershy sympathized.

"Um... sorry?" Pinkie grinned awkwardly.

"Not your fault," Rock dismissed their worries. "We're used to Wily pulling strange things out of nowhere."

"So long as no one uses anything dangerously potent, we should be able to deal with it with no more problems than usual," Roll clarified.

"We could still blast him with the Elements," Spike offered.

"Let's table that option until we actually *find* him," Twilight told her assistant/little brother before turning back to the visiting loopers. "Sorry the whole sanctuary thing isn't working out like it normally does."

"Are you kidding?" Rock grinned suddenly. "This has been great! We can actually walk around town without being mobbed by hero worshipers!"

"Yeah," Roll agreed happily. "And we haven't had to deal with one anti-robot terrorist organization, robot worshiping cult, or paranoid government agent since we got here!"

There were synchronized blinks from the Equestrian loopers as they processed that.

"Hey, Blues!" Rainbow Dash greeted her wayward friend at the edge of the Whitetail Woods. "I got your message! You finally ready to go talk things out with your dad?"

"No," the prototype robot decisively smashed her hopes. "I just wanted you to know that I'm leaving for a while."

"What?" Rainbow Dash blinked. "But..."

"I'm sorry," the shades-wearing robot stallion told her truthfully, "but there's something I have to go do."

"You're going to look for Wily, aren't you?" Dash asked him flatly.

"...Yes," the wayward brother of Equestria's heroes admitted. "He's up to something bigger than anyone knows and someone has to find out what."

"Okay, I guess I can accept that," Dash rubbed the back of her head. "On one condition!"

Blues's eyebrow raised above his shades curiously. "And what would that be?"

"That you're back in time to take me to the Gala," Dash stepped forward and tucked a golden ticket into his scarf. "No excuses! Your dad's not going, and I don't know what the hay's up between you two in the first place, but you owe it to your brother and sister to at least *meet* them. And a formal setting's as good as any!"

Blues stared back at her emotionlessly before turning away, his scarf rustling in a sudden breeze.

"No promises," he told her as he walked away. After a few steps, he turned his head back. "But I'll do my best."

In the past few weeks, Diamond Tiara's world had been turned upside down. Her father had met with Dr. Light to make a business arrangement, a *lucrative* business arrangement, which meant that the bla–pegasus that was his adopted daughter had suddenly jumped from peasant to equal on the social scale where she was concerned. Which meant she needed to play nice or risk her father's contract since the odd but brilliant stallion thought the world of his children.

It had been an... interesting experience.

The fa–robot pony Silver Spoon had proven to be very cultured and refined once she'd begun actually paying attention to her. As... she'd... put it: 'Someone has to make sure Scoots behaves herself properly'. And then Scoots had taken mild offense and the two had gotten to arguing.

That had been an eye opener. She'd thought Silver Spoon was some sort of personal servant that was created to be even more obedient than the hired help and there she was arguing childishly with the one she supposedly served.

Even the pea–Applebloom and Sweetie Belle that Scootaloo liked to 'hang out' with had proven good... friends in the end.

It had been a rocky start at first, and mostly due to her she could now admit. For one, they'd wanted her to *do* things, not just *talk* about things. And they were *very* insistent about that. Doing things herself had been scary after a life of having everything done for her by other ponies, but despite the dirt, the low-brow activities, and the tree sap that seemed to follow the group it had been... fun.

And then the robo-alicorn 'daughter' of Twilight, Nyx, had joined them. Diamond hadn't known what to make of her. She looked like... a filly Nightmare Moon for one, an alicorn for another, and yet acted like neither unless she was joking around. And she'd been made without a cutie mark.

The last part had become important recently. Diamond had thought Twilight was still deciding on one to give the robot filly when a sleepover at Fluttershy's had turned into a scramble for survival in the Everfree with a cockatrice. Nyx of all fillies had held the thing off, her metal body seemingly immune to the creature's petrifying stare, until Fluttershy pacified it.

And had earned a cutie mark of a shield emblazoned with a crescent moon in the process, her talent being defending others.

The phenomenon had floored her. According to miss Cheerilee, cutie marks were something unique to ponies (and pony-like races like zebras), which meant that Nyx could only earn one *if she was really a pony* .

It was... intriguing to her to say the least. Plus, spending time around the bla–three who had yet to earn their cutie marks had caused her to start wondering about what her own meant. Surely it meant more than being a pampered princess and looking regal in the well-crafted look-alike tiara her father had commissioned for her... right?

Of course, that train of thought could wait until after she and the rest finished putting together their skit for the talent show. Honestly, the other three non-robotic 'crusaders' were Tartarus-bent on taking on roles they were singularly unsuited for, and the other two weren't calling them on it for some reason.

Maybe it was time somepony took charge...

"My Mega Pony, My Mega Pony

Ahh, ahh, ahh, ahhh...

(My Mega Pony)

I will stop your wily plans Doctor Wily

(My Mega Pony)

Saving the world from your villainy

Big adventures

Tons of fights

A determined heart

Faithful and strong

Saving the world!

It's not an easy feat

But I and my family will not retreat.

I am Mega Pony

And I will not fail all my very best friends!" (11)

"ARGH!" the frustrated cry of Diamond Tiara interrupted Scootaloo's composition of the song for the group's talent show entry. "That does it!

"Something wrong DT?" Scootaloo asked the rich filly. *'As if I couldn't guess.'*

"Scootaloo," Diamond glared at her, "your song is... not bad to be honest, but you are not a musical composer! A filly with your natural acrobatic ability should be on the choreography! Not song-writing!"

"Hey!" Applebloom protested from nearby. "I'm tha one doin' tha dancin'! Kung-fu style even! Hi-ya!"

"No!" Diamond vetoed the thought. "Scootaloo is the better dancer! *And* the better martial artist!"

"Ah know that!" Applebloom shouted back. "Her pa's one a' tha assistant instructors after all!"

"Dr. Light is an accomplished polymath," Silver observed from where she'd been tapped to help Sweetie with the disastrous decorations.

"What's math got ta do with it?" Applebloom looked confused.

"It means he's good at lots of stuff," Nyx told her.

" *Which doesn't matter right now!* " the pink tiara-wearing filly insisted. "Applebloom, you should be doing the set design instead of the choreography!"

"Hey!" Sweetie Belle protested.

"Why?" Applebloom backed up at Diamond's fierce expression.

"Because you are the most qualified!" the irate filly yelled. "Look what you did with the treehouse!"

"That weren't anythin' special..." the farm filly looked down.

"Not anything..." Diamond gaped. "That is nearly professional quality work! Exactly what we need for our set! No arguments!"

Applebloom shut her mouth from where she'd been about to protest.

"What about me then?" Sweetie sulked.

"You will be rewriting the music into a proper song!" Diamond ordered. "No complaints! Don't think I haven't seen you giving our resident daredevil advice on how to improve her attempts! You are the song leader! Now hop to it!"

'About time,' Scootaloo rolled her eyes. She wasn't bad with singing after all the Loops she'd been through, but Sweetie was simply a natural at it. Heck, if this worked out alright, all three of them could earn their cutie marks at the same time. They'd arranged it amongst

themselves a few times when all three were Awake, but it tended to be hit-or-miss. The more they focused on earning their cutie marks instead of the task that would earn it for them, the less likely it was to work.

"What are you two talking about?" Diamond had rounded on the two robot fillies.

"Oh, we'd had a bet going on when you'd snap and take charge," Silver told the pink earth pony filly. "I won."

"I don't know whether to find that flattering or insulting," Diamond glared at the two as Scootaloo chuckled and began hashing out a choreography routine for the six of them.

"My Mega Pony, My Mega Pony,

What are robots all about?

My Mega Pony, My Mega Pony

Robots are magic!

My Mega Pony,

I used to wonder what robots could mean,

My Mega Pony

To a world that's all so serene.

When you were built your tasks around the house you'd tend,

No robot masters to fight and no shining cities to defend

But My Mega Ponies, that old Wily had to try,

He took those made to improve things, turned their tasks into a lie

And you could do nothing but stand by.

My Mega Pony,

I used to wonder what robots could mean,

My Mega Pony

To a world that's all so serene.

Now you face danger when it comes around, you were remade in the Light,

You won't let the Blues take hold, you always take another try,

Demands for surrender, Automatically denied, Wily's lies you refuse to buy

Your metal hooves are grounded, a Rock-steady ally

Still you keep the laughter Rolling, to hold your spirits high.

My Mega Pony,

I used to wonder what robots could mean,

My Mega Pony

To a world that's all so serene.

Your copy chip gives power, and it's growing all the time.

A new adventure waits for us each day is yours and mine.

We'll make it special every time!

We'll make it special every time!

My Mega Pony

What a beautiful ballad robots sing

My Mega Pony

How I hope your story never,

Ends

Even as more robots Wily,

Sends

you're my very best

Friends,

you're my very best friends!" (*)

Rock and Roll idly wondered how hard it would be to sneak out of the talent show's audience. The song their adopted sister and her five friends (three biological and two mechanical) were performing was flattering and all, but this kind of fame was embarrassing dang it!

Diamond Tiara snuggled into her bed and gazed at the Best Show ribbon she'd won with her friends. First place and three earned cutie marks in the process. That had to be some sort of record.

Applebloom had gotten an actual apple bloom for hers, except one could see it was made of wood by the not-quite-finished paint job on it. A mark for how she was at her best when making things.

Sweetie Bell had gotten a heart-themed musical note, and Nyx had said something about how a heart motif on a cutie mark was often an indication of the high level of love and care a pony put into their particular talent. Sweetie had blushed *crimson* at the praise.

And Scootaloo had ended up with a shooting star on her flank. Even Diamond knew that star-themed marks denoted a high level of practical ability in the talent, and a shooting star was particularly impressive.

But even that achievement paled in her personal estimate with how *proud* her parents had been. Over something she'd done *herself* , not just ordered or paid others to do. Her father had gushed about how every great leader knew when to 'roll up their sleeves' and do the dirty work. He'd even given her a whispered confession that he'd had to buckle down and do nearly every job in his own company at least once.

Her dad thought she had the makings of a great leader. Because she'd helped her friends achieve something great by 'rolling up her sleeves' and helping them herself.

With that thought and a smile, she drifted off to sleep.

Blues came back online in a cave. He'd gone wandering and found what seemed like a promising place saturated with the dark presence he'd identified from remote access to the lab's computers as similar to what had attacked his brother and sister this Loop. And so he'd headed straight into it to find the source and see if Dr. Wily was involved, only to collapse as it started interfering with his systems.

Even now, he could feel it surrounding him, but he was somehow immune. A quick check of his systems showed that he'd actually been treated with the energy in a way that protected against its disruptive influence. His experimental thaumic energy core had been adj–

A repair to his faulty power core would end up erasing his personality.

–usted even. Fixed. Improved no less. A familiar helmet rested on his head, and the kind of shield that had become his trademark in his home Loop was strapped to his foreleg. Those two things hadn't been there this Loop. Not yet. His original shield from his home Loop was both not properly weighted for his pony form and still in his subspace pocket.

There was only one possible culprit.

"Dr. Wily I presume?" he asked the shadows around him, and was rewarded when the mad scientist stepped forth.

"Why, yes, my dear colt," the earth pony looked impressed. "How did you guess?"

"Only two ponies have this kind of ability," he stated flatly. "And of them only you are on the run and hiding out."

"Still a keen mind on you, I see," Dr. Wily observed him calculatingly. "What brings you out here in the first place?"

"I needed a break from things," he said simply. "And I am indebted to you for rescuing me."

"I see..." Wily pondered. "Then perhaps in breaking away from your former self, you can help me break my enemies? Be my Break Mane."

Blues remained silent and let the stallion draw his own conclusions.

Welcome back to the dark side.

"Well, you will make a fine addition!" Dr. Wily took the silence as agreement and led him into another room.

Only his full-face helmet and shades prevented Blues' expression from giving away his total shock at what was in that room.

"A fine addition to the stars indeed!"

He had to get out of here and warn the others. He had to escape and tell them what was coming. Tell them of the he–

A living hell of his own making.

–ll that had followed them to this fused Loop.

Oh, come on. Stay a while. You'll learn to like it.

"Now, I have heard the Apploosans' side of things. The land is the only flat arable area appropriate for growing the trees which are their primary food source. Complete removal of the trees would mean their starvation. However, I have not heard your side Chief Thunderhooves and I would like to so that I may see if we can come to some manner of agreement."

"It is simple. The path for our traditional stampede is sacred to us. It is unthinkable to stampede elsewhere."

"Hmph. Typical tribal nons–"

"That is enough Sheriff Silverstar. Chief Thunderhooves, I can tell that you and your buffalo are fair, mighty, and wise. And it is my experience that such beings do not simply create traditions from nothing, especially not sacred ones. So, please, tell me why this path is so sacred."

Something about that way the older pony, this 'Doctor Light', spoke, with intelligence and respect, had told him that he would not be dismissive of his tribe's beliefs. And so he had told the pony the origins of the stampede and why it was such an important tradition to the buffalo.

When he had finished, the pony hadn't derided him for 'backwards' thinking or dismissed his concerns as those of a 'savage'. Instead, he'd spoken fondly of a tradition from his own home. A 'running of the

leaves' that sounded so much like his tribe's sacred stampede that he could almost believe the pony was really a buffalo at heart.

And then Sheriff Silverstar had added a tradition of his own from before he'd come out to this area to settle with the other ponies, with none of the rancor or condescension he'd shown before. He'd responded with a tale of his tribe's spring celebrations, to which Light responded with a story of the Hearth's Warming winter 'holiday', followed by the sheriff's telling of his last 'family reunion'.

It had been a grand story-telling that lacked only an equally grand fire, but instead topped off with those *delicious* apples.

At some point, two of the farming ponies who were in charge of the trees had joined them and he was showing them on a map just where the stampede's path went. Most of the orchard could actually be kept with no disruption, but it was not an insignificant amount of trees that would have to be moved.

But Light seemed to have answers for everything. He'd asked questions regarding the needed traits of the land for the trees and before the chief knew it he'd been telling them of an area not prohibitively far away that could serve to grow those trees that were moved. It was less flat, but the quality of the soil and nearness to water would serve.

He'd even found himself telling the ponies of plants native to the region that were perfectly good sources of food for his own buffalo and could be more easily grown in the arid region than the trees the ponies prided themselves on. And the farm ponies had listened, even offered a share of the apples to his buffalo for the use of the remaining land. It was nothing short of a miracle he'd witnessed.

Not to say that his tribe conceded nothing in the exchange. For one, he'd ended up volunteering the tribes services to help move the trees from the stampede path to their new grounds and promised to help teach the pony farmers how to grow and prepare the native food plants his own tribe normally subsisted on. For another, the

ponies seemed quite interested in trading for tribal goods the buffalo made.

But the most interesting one was what Light himself had requested. He wanted the chance to join the tribe in their sacred stampede. Such was hardly forbidden, but none outside the tribe had ever *asked* .

And now here he was, about to start the traditional sacred stampede with his tribesbuffalo, and over a dozen of the ponies mixed in among them.

"It has been my observation that no matter how true traditions remain to their origins, some change is inevitable," the pony known as Light spoke sagely next to him.

"Yes," he agreed. His grandfather had liked to rail against the inclusion of tribal adornments in the stampede, claiming that true buffalo would never run while wearing such frivolous things. "Not always for the better, but sometimes."

"Perhaps this is one such time?" Light inquired as the stampede began.

"Only the future may tell," he replied as the thundering of hooves grew in volume with the advance of the mixed herd of buffalo and ponies.

The CMC might not be trying for cutie marks anymore, but they still went out and tried some crazy stuff to see what else they might find fun. Scootaloo's adoptive father was good at plenty of things outside his own cutie mark of a lit bulb, and so they'd decided to try and see what else the six of them could learn how to do. How their current outing had led to getting stories from other ponies about how they earned their cutie marks was something Diamond wasn't too clear on, but she had to admit that some of them were shaping up to be

pretty interesting. Just like the marks themselves, no two ways of earning them seemed to be exactly alike.

"You really fought off a chupacabra with a broom?" Diamond Tiara asked Roll incredulously after she and the other crusaders heard her cutie mark story.

"He was making a mess," Roll stated simply.

Huh. No wonder her cutie mark looked the way it did. It was a *combat* broom. Diamond wouldn't have believed such a thing possible before then.

"Thanks for helping me get out of there," Blues told his current companion.

"I should be thanking you," the beige-coated pegasus mare with a mane in various shades of gray, a compass rose cutie mark, and wearing a pith helmet, known to most as Daring Do, replied. "I've dealt with most of that crowd before, but never all at once."

"Bet it gets rather repetitive," Blues observed carefully.

"You have *no* idea," Daring rolled her eyes as they put as much distance between themselves and the temple as possible.

"Ever go back in time?" the robot stallion decided to fish a bit.

"Thankfully, no," Daring told him with no indication that the question meant anything out of the ordinary to her. "I've heard of some things that are supposed to do that but all the ones I've found have been either duds or broken, assuming their abilities weren't outright falsehoods to begin with."

"I suppose we should take our blessings where we get them," he allowed. *'Not looping. Though she didn't seem to think anything was* too *off with that group, so no big surprise.'* He'd recognized parts of

the group's appearances as being from his Loop, which meant they were significantly different from whatever this place's baseline had. So if Daring was Awake, she'd have seemed a lot more surprised than she had been.

"Right now, I'd be happy with the blessing of some faster transportation," Daring grumbled. "We need to get word to the princesses about what that lot is up to and you're the only one who can offer proof."

No one will believe it.

"Sorry," he told her sincerely, "I'd give you the data but we can't risk whatever they infected me with spreading to other devices."

Pinkie's mane fell straight as the hairdryer lifted from her head, only to immediately poof back up.

"I swear," Rarity huffed as she watched the phenomenon happen, "you do that on purpose."

"Aww," Pinkie grinned cheekily, "but the poofy mane look is just me!"

"I dunno," Rock said from where he'd been roped into getting groomed with the rest by his sister. "You look pretty good with a straight mane too."

"Yeah, but it doesn't really go with my gala dress," Pinkie admitted with a smile.

" *Ah'm* still trying to wrap my mind around tha two a' ya going ta tha gala together," Applejack interjected from where she was polishing Fluttershy's hooves. "How'd *that* happen?"

"I asked, she said yes," Rock shrugged nonchalantly.

"I think Applejack meant 'why Pinkie?'," Twilight elaborated.

"Why not?" Rock looked confused.

" *I* think it's cute," Roll insisted from where she was taking the opportunity to style her brother's mane in a ridiculous fashion she knew he would adjust to something more sensible once she and the others were finished having fun.

"Says the sister who'd ship me with anything female and not family," Rock shot back.

"I would not!" Roll looked offended. "There's an age and beauty requirement too." She thought for a second before adding: "And a sanity one." (12)

"You sure?" Daring asked Blues as the two came within sight of Ponyville.

"Yes," Blues replied. "My father can get you in touch with your contacts while I head to Canterlot and inform the princesses."

"And the gala?" the adventurer mare continued.

Oh, that sounds fun! All those nobles and other ponies trampling each other to de–

He watched, horrified, as Rock fell lifelessly to the ground.

– **ath in a panic when you break the news! You should totally do that!**

"I'll tell them after the gala," Blues informed her. "That way they can give the matter their undivided attention. We have that much time at least. Besides, I have a promise to keep."

Dash sighed as she trotted over to her dress so Rarity could get her done up in time for them all to make the carriage Twilight arranged

for them. No word from her 'date' for the evening. No letter, no message, no noth–

She stopped when she saw the stallion mannequin next to the one that had her dress bereft of the tuxedo it had held, a damp towel and a note in the garment's place.

Meeting you there. Sorry if I worried you.

- Blues

P.S. How's my stealth?

Dash shook her head in amazement. Only Blues would treat getting into his gala tux as a spy mission.

"I must say, this is quite the pleasant surprise Daring," Dr. Light smiled as he led the adventurer to the communications array, both of them politely pretending not to notice the six starry-eyed fillies who thought themselves well-concealed. "How many years has it been since that unpleasantness down south?"

"Too many to justify not keeping in touch and not nearly enough to get over what happened," Daring admitted as she began entering something into the panel. "And I wish it was a social call that brought me here."

"Who is–" a young female voice answered the call Daring had made, only to cut off in an excited squeal. "Ohmygosh! It's Daring Do!"

Dr. Light chuckled as the golden-feathered griffon child on the vid-screen went full fanhen over his now flustered guest.

" *See?!* " the child insisted to an older griffon hen whose feather coloration was more 'bald eagle' than 'golden eagle'. "See cousin Gilda?! I *told* you she was real!"

The griffon friend of Rainbow Dash who had visited earlier that year simply stood there gawking at his visitor.

"I do apologize for any impoliteness," Dr. Light told the older griffon, "but we need to speak with your uncle. It's quite urgent."

"Yes," Gilda shook her head in a daze as she focused on the task given to her. "I'll go get him. Come on, squirt."

"Okay!" the younger griffon chirped as she followed the other. "Bye Miss Do!"

"Who was the younger one?" Daring asked once they had left.

"Did you forget that he had a daughter?" Dr. Light raised his eyebrow.

"But... he said she'd just hatched!" Daring sputtered. "Has it really been that long?"

"I'm afraid it has," a male voice came over the communicator as a stern-looking adult male griffon with golden feathers and eyeglasses stepped into view. "Bright, Daring," he greeted amiably. "What seems to be the problem?"

Twilight blinked as she stepped out of the carriage and spotted an unfamiliar stallion in a pompadour and sunglasses, at night no less, waving to her and her friends. Or rather, to a specific member of the group.

"You made it!" Rainbow dashed over to what was apparently her escort, she'd been rather insistent that it wasn't a 'date' to all of them, for the evening.

"I promised, didn't I?" the stallion smirked.

"Well," Rarity walked up to the two hoof-in-arm with teen-form Spike, "aren't you going to introduce us to your coltfriend Dash?"

"I keep telling you, it's not like that!" Dash insisted, "but this is–"

"DLN-000, Blues Light," Roll cut in as she and her brother, with Pinkie in tow, joined Rarity. "Nice to finally meet you, brother."

"I'm surprised you managed to get him here," Rock added. "He certainly hasn't been returning any of *our* calls since we found him in the Lab's database."

"You never said they'd been calling you!" Dash poked the prototype pony-bot with her hoof accusingly.

Twilight noted the dirty look Blues shot his siblings as Pinkie began going into full party planning mode regarding the older robot's getting-the-family-back-together party.

"I'm not talking to my father," Blues cut her off so sharply that Pinkie halted in mid-air and slowly drifted to the ground. "This isn't just a social call either. I'm here to speak with the princesses immediately after the gala. I have important information regarding national security for them."

"How important is it?" Twilight found herself asking, taken aback by how serious he'd sounded.

"Not so important that I want to risk causing a panic with the gala in full swing," he told them. "But it concerns Dr. Wily. And a group called The Stars."

"I'm glad you could come over so fast," Dr. Light greeted the griffon as he stepped out of the Lab's teleporter. Biological transport along the long distance teleportation network was a recent development in unicorn magical emulation and still limited in regards to who had

access to it, but significant strides in the technology were being made.

"Think nothing of it," the griffon scientist said as his daughter came through next, followed by his niece Gilda. "If this is as serious as Daring claims, we can't waste any time."

"Who are you?" the voice of a young filly cut into the conversation as Scootaloo entered the room.

"Hi!" the youngest griffon scampered eagerly over to the pegasus filly. "I'm Kalinka! Who are you?"

"I'm Scootaloo," the adopted daughter of Dr. Light answered, "and these are my friends Applebloom, Silver Spoon, Sweetie Belle, Diamond Tiara, and Nyx."

"Oh, wow!" Kalinka oohed as she spotted the black pony robot. "You're an alicorn!"

"Yes, indeed," Dr. Light chuckled. "Many of you recall Kalinka's cousin Gilda," he gestured to the older griffon female who waved half-heartedly before turning to the male griffon. "And this is her father and a good friend of mine, Dr. Mikhail Cossack of the Griffon Empire."

"Well, well," Spitfire arched an impressed eyebrow, "you're Light's guard prototype? I remember him claiming that you'd be the equal of any wonderbolt once he got you up in the air."

"That's because he's been testing the pegasus harness against Dash here," Blues gestured to his companion who was doing her best not to hyperventilate at holding a conversation with her idol. "She's been setting the gold standard for the device since day one at the lab. There's still a few kinks to work out from what I hear."

"Really?" Spitfire turned her attention to the rainbow-maned pegasus. "I saw the footage of that thing in action against Air Tercel. It's a fine piece of work as it stands, and it still doesn't measure up to you?"

"Well..." Dash began sheepishly, feeling oddly embarrassed by the praise, "Doc Light insists on it being the best, which means I've got to give it *my* best, so..."

"I see," Spitfire hmmed. "Well, you're already invited to our training camp next spring for your performance in the young flyers' competition, and after hearing this, I expect to see great things from you then."

Rainbow Dash *almost* contained the resulting squee of joy.

Daring Do stared intently at one of Mikhail's robots that had come through the lab's teleporter after him. "Who are you supposed to be?"

The sphinx model robot stared back at her just as intently. "I am Pharaoh Sphinx, developed after extensive research on the kinds of temples you yourself tend to come across. I am fully equipped for trap detection and disarmament, my solar-energy Pharaoh Shot is both a light source and a defensive weapon, and I am tempered to withstand the dark magic of the vilest and most malevolent curses with little issue. The pharaoh theme is mostly aesthetic, though I won't complain if it means a few curses think I'm supposed to be there."

"You made a robot to do my job?" Daring turned her stare to the robot's creator.

"I made a robot who could withstand the dark magic saturating those ruins we all visited back then," Dr. Cossack defended himself.

Daring winced at the reminder of one of the few places she'd gone that didn't appear in the books she'd written as A.K. Yearling. Not because it was uneventful, most of those at least got mentions when they became relevant, but because it was her biggest failure. None of them had gained anything from that place, and suffered losses instead. She wondered if the diamond dog Pedro had ever recovered from his injury.

"In any case, I think we should share what we know," Dr. Light reminded his colleagues of why they were here as the giggling voices of the seven children emanated from another room.

"Of course," Daring admitted. "I went back to the Lanfront ruins after a series of rumors regarding some of my old adversaries reached my ears. I managed to sneak in, barely, and discover that they were all part of the same cult group. I only escaped due to the help of your eldest 'son' Bright, but not before I found out that they're all planning something big. Have been for some time."

"You said they were part of a cult," Dr. Cossack pushed his glasses up his beak. "Which one?"

"They call themselves 'The Stars'," Daring told them to sharp intakes of breath. "The same ones who were predicted to be responsible for the return of Nightmare Moon. Not sure how accurate that part is, but the cult's been around at least a thousand years under similar names. But it's been around even longer under other names, their goal for ages to plunge the world into 'eternal darkness'. Originally, it was called the Order of Le Mu, or depending on who was translating, the Order of Ra Moon."

"Is it ready?" a voice in the shadows asked.

"Yes..." the gleeful voice of Dr. Wily responded. "With my enhancements the device is now ready to fire. No need for those inefficient baubles hidden in crumbling temples you used to go after."

"Then let the darkness fall so the Stars may reign supreme."

A wave of dark magic spread out from the area south of Equestria known as the Lanfront ruins, affecting everything in its path. All animals not born of dark magic stumbled and collapsed as it swept over them and trees began to lose color. The shadows choked the sky and stifled all light above so it could never reach the ground.

As the dark wave passed over Equestria, magical devices ceased functioning and ponies everywhere stumbled and fell where they stood. Unicorns blacked out completely and many pegasi were injured from the crashes that resulted when the weather magic they relied on to aid flight was disrupted.

In a power plant, Elec Mare shorted out and fell to the floor.

Guts Stallion collapsed on stage at a karaoke bar he'd gone to after his shift, his backup singers Bomb Stallion and Cut Mare fell beside him as well.

Fire Mare's flames went out suddenly while she was on the night shift at a Manehattan waste disposal plant.

Ice Mare fell face-first in the snow far in the frozen north.

Cloudsdale shuddered as the wave passed over it and began to lose cohesion. Those pegasi that retained consciousness would manage to push the clouds towards the ground afterwards in an effort to evacuate the city before it lost form completely.

"Scoots?" Nyx asked her unconscious friend worriedly. "Bloom? Silver? DT? Sweetie? Kalinka? What just happened?"

"So what's the big important secret you need to tell the princesses?" Dash asked as she danced with her escort for the evening. She'd figured that she'd spent so much effort getting all fancied up that she might as well at least once.

"You'll find out in due time," Blues smiled secretively. "Just relax and enjoy the night until then."

"You love doing that, don't y–" she cut off as she felt her connection to the Element of Loyalty, the one Twilight had been training her and the others in developing, flare hard enough to give her a headache before going dark. She had just enough time to wonder what that meant before she lost consciousness as well.

"SISTER!" Blues heard a terrified voice bellow as he did his best to keep his 'date' for the evening from hitting the floor. All of a sudden everyone at the gala had swayed and collapsed. The unicorns all looked to be unconscious, and the pegasi and earth ponies were at best too disoriented from whatever had happened to stand. A quick check showed that his brother and sister were completely offline.

The only ones still standing were himself and an angry alicorn of the night now stomping up to him. Behind her, he could see a very much knocked out Celestia.

"YOU!" Luna bellowed loud enough that he had to brace himself in order to ensure he didn't fall over. **"EXPLAIN WHAT SORCERY THIS IS THAT LAYS OUR LITTLE PONIES LOW! EXPLAIN WHY THOU STAND WHEN THEY DO NOT!"**

"Princess," he said respectfully, "I suspect I'm still standing for much the same reason you are. We've both played unwilling host to a dark force like the one that did this."

Luna's eyes widened in terror as she processed that statement.

Nyx took several deep breaths, which she'd later admit didn't really do anything for her mechanical body, and tried to calm down and remember what her mom had told her to do when situations like this cropped up in the Loops.

First step in this kind of situation: Check the victims.

The other Crusaders, Awake or otherwise, were unconscious but not injured. That at least was a relief.

Second step: What could she do about it?

Without knowing what had caused their sudden collapse... not much. Her robot form this Loop wasn't capable of channelling the full range of magical abilities she was used to, but she could still take most opponents with the contents of her subspace pocket if nothing else. But there weren't any villains to fight right now, or at least none that she could sense...

Third step: Who did she know who could help?

Her mom had told her that, for the most part, Loop memories and instincts could be trusted. Because many Loops seemed to subscribe to narrative causality to some extent, Loop instincts could at least be trusted to 'advance the plot' as it were. It wasn't a bad fallback strategy in any case.

And according to Scoots and Silver, Dr. Light generally either knew what to do or could figure something out. Her experiences around the lab certainly hadn't contradicted that. He was a lot like her mom in some ways.

Which was how she found herself racing down the halls as fast as her hooves could carry her, shouting for the older stallion.

"Dr. Light! Dr. Light! Come quick! Hel–EEEK!" She yelled as she barrelled around the doorframe into the lab where she knew he was entertaining guests, and almost ran into a pony-like figure done up in

modern zebra voodoo stereotype with bones and skulls and a just downright spooky and scary demeanor.

She was so keyed up by the situation that she let out a bolt of magic at the sinister figure out of sheer reflex, and gulped as it dissipated on a shimmering sinisterly-shaped barrier.

"Twilight?" Rarity asked wearily as she returned to consciousness.

"Yes, Rarity?" said unicorn inquired as she shook the cobwebs out of her mind.

"Why are we on the floor of the palace ballroom?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Did someone leave the gag running?" Pinkie queried blearily from nearby.

Twilight ignored her friend's non sequitur as she took stock of what was going on. She'd been enjoying the gala as it was meant to be enjoyed for a change of pace, she and the rest of her friends had somehow been coaxed onto the dance floor, and then her brain at the base of her horn had metaphorically exploded resulting in the loss of consciousness.

'Okay, I think this Loop just crossed the 'non interference' line,' she thought to herself as she noted the completely offline forms of the visiting Anchors amidst ponies in varying states of recovery from unconsciousness. Idly filing away the fact that unicorns seemed the worst off, she got to her feet and began to list out a course of action.

Step one: Figure out what just happened.

She made to cast a few scrying spells, and blinked when nothing happened.

"Let's try that again," she muttered to herself and tried to put some more effort into it, only to promptly stop as pain shot through her head near her horn and her vision swam.

'Alright, bad idea...' she managed to remain standing. *'Let's skip a few steps and go straight for the Elements then.'*

Twilight stood there for a few seconds before the fact that the Element of Magic was refusing to manifest sunk in.

'How...?' she thought as she examined her connection with the soul-bound artifact. *'Okay, it's still* there *, but it's... weak or something.'* Whatever happened was somehow interfering with the Elements. It wouldn't be the first time something managed to shut them down, a few Loops with the Smooze came to mind, but it wasn't exactly a common occurrence.

Twilight decided to cut straight to the chase and go full alicorn. She'd explain later, maybe use excuse 3Q this time. She hadn't tried that one in a while.

When she regained consciousness again, Twilight would liken the attempt to trying to manually turn herself inside out. Without pain killing effects of any kind.

"I'm *so* sorry!" Nyx apologized for the umpteenth time as she and the voodoo zebra figure finished moving her friends someplace more comfortable.

As it turned out, the griffon scientist had brought more of his robots, eight in all, through the portal with him. Skull Mane was the zebra-like model done up with stereotypical voodoo accessories like an equine skull-shaped helmet, bones (both real and fake) braided into his mane and tail, and the power to make barriers in the same shape as his helmet.

Plus he was one of only two of Dr. Cossack's robots that hadn't been shut down by whatever it was. Even the lab's systems, mostly running on magic generators, were offline.

"It is fine," the robot replied politely. Again. "As I keep telling you, I was designed as a guardian. A fearsome appearance is one of the oldest methods of defense that any intelligent race has practiced. By appearing frightening, I cut down the number of hostile creatures that wish to test my abilities in the first place and make many more unsure about attacking what I defend. Scaring allies and potential friends is an unfortunate side effect I have learned to live with."

"But I *still* shouldn't have assumed–" Nyx protested.

"What?" the zebra-bot cut her off. "That an unfamiliar figure in your home might be responsible for the attack that harmed your friends and family? While my appearance might not do me many favors in regards to misunderstandings, it was hardly the only strike against me in this case."

"Yeah, okay," Nyx finally relented. "How are you moving around still anyway?"

"Like Pharaoh Sphinx, I am tempered to resist the disruptive influences of dark magic," Skull Mane explained as the two headed back to the lab. The doctors had recovered relatively quickly and had requested to see her after her friends were secured. "It would be very inconvenient in my duties if my defenses could be circumvented by any sinister party with basic knowledge of malevolent curse-style magic."

"Ah, there you are Nyx," Dr. Light's voice greeted warmly, if a bit weakly. "I must again say I am pleased to see you unaffected by whatever has befallen us. With your permission, I and Dr. Cossack would like to study how you resist this influence. His method of shielding against dark magic should prove enough to get parts of the lab up and running in a few days, but I think you may be able to help speed that timeframe up."

'Tree damn this Loop and whoever did this!' Rarity growled as she massaged her aching head and continued walking down the palace hallway. *'When I find the rooter responsible I will buck them straight into the sun!'*

She'd watched as Twilight fell to the floor of the ballroom in a seizure mere moments after recovering from the unexpected disaster that had rendered them unconscious in the first place. She had yet to regain consciousness since.

Nor was Twilight the only one adversely affected. Celestia also had yet to awaken, and Shining Armor had reported that Cadance was in the same state. It was thus little surprise that the panic incited by Celestia's forced indisposal meant they hadn't noticed what had become of their newest looping friends Rock and Roll until somepony literally tripped over their inert forms.

The robots, along with all other electronics or magical devices, had been shut down by the event and remained utterly inoperable. That their brother Blues was unaffected was a mystery.

Speaking of those mysteriously unaffected, Luna had done her duty and taken charge of Equestria while her sister recovered, and was being run into the ground by the constant demands on her time and attention.

Reports had come in of the effects on other areas of Equestria and they hadn't stopped since. The shroud of darkness over Equestria made high noon no brighter than a moonlit night, and nighttime... It was dark enough to give even the bravest ponies shivers. Panic ran rampant in all cities and towns and civil services everywhere were stretched beyond their limits. Cloudsdale in particular had been completely destroyed as the magic holding it together came undone, and only the brave efforts of many of its citizens had saved the rest. It was a miracle and a testament to Equestria's solidarity that there had been no deaths.

'Gah!' Rarity swore internally as another sharp pain lanced through her head. *'It's so hard to* think *these days... And nothing makes it any better!'*

Then there were the effects on the ponies themselves. With the notable exception of Luna, magic had all but left the populace of Equestria. The most anypony of the three races was capable of performing were the most basic of cantrips. Unicorns like Rarity herself suffered from severe headaches at the base of their horns and even basic telekinesis for many (though not Rarity herself for some reason) became impossible. Pegasi had lost their ability to use weather magic and those like Rainbow Dash who used it almost all the time were effectively grounded as a result. Even earth ponies were finding out how much magic they used subconsciously as their daily tasks became that much harder and many complained of aching limbs. Perhaps the most telling of all was that Pinkie's mane had gone razor straight and she couldn't re-poof it without exhausting herself.

She and the remaining Awake Elements, including Spike even though he wasn't 'on duty' this Loop, had convened to discuss their options for dealing with the situation while the Unawake Rainbow Dash had been asked to see if she could get anything out of Blues as to why he wasn't affected. The options were... not encouraging.

With Twilight down, the Elements of Harmony would have been off the table even if they hadn't gone dormant. They'd given reactivating them a decent effort, but the results had been along the lines of 'diddly' and 'squat'. Then they'd tried pulling things out of their subspace pockets to make an assessment, only for technological devices to fritz and magical ones to cease functioning the moment they were brought out. After the second 'energetic' failure they'd unanimously decided not to bring out anything else.

They'd debated for a while until Pinkie had apparently had enough and declared that she was going to go 'full chaos goddess' and fix everything, and then throw a party for all of Equestria to help them recover. She'd pulled out a lump of cosmic spectrum, one that

Twilight insisted every member of the alicorn club carry ever since that Loop where the Smooze nullified the elements and by extension their preferred method of ascending, and focused. The magical stone had pulsed and then shattered into dust, Pinkie's eyes had rolled back in her head, foam formed at her mouth, and she began convulsing uncontrollably.

It was exactly what had happened to Twilight back in the ballroom while their attention had been elsewhere. Down to the small pile of magically inert dust Rarity then realized must have been Twilight's own backup cosmic spectrum.

After they'd gotten Pinkie squared away, Spike had suggested that he scry with the Force and see if he could learn anything. Since it wasn't really magic, native to the Loop or otherwise, it shouldn't be affected by whatever had happened.

Except that it was... somehow. Spike had been able to use the Force just fine, but the moment he opened his mind everything had gone wrong. He'd gone limp and vacant before beginning to mutter nonsense, and he hadn't stopped since.

Fluttershy had lost her temper about then and tried to wildshape and go flying off in a blind rage to find the one responsible, except... Well, Luna had been needed to undo the result and put Fluttershy back to rights. Applejack had readily agreed that further experimentation with non-native Loop abilities should be put on hold until they learned more.

'If only our best scholar in all things magic would wake up so we could get on that. Or if whoever did this would at least make themselves known so we can kick their flank and get on with things!' she sighed as she prepared to round an upcoming corner. *'Honestly, I haven't felt this helpless since–'*

"You need to tell them," Luna's voice shook the dressmaker out of her musings right before she rounded the corner. Many Loops of

experience in cloak and dagger type scenarios prompted her to conceal herself as best as possible and eavesdrop.

"I will," the voice of Blues responded, "eventually."

"That is what I used to tell myself in regards to the jealousy I felt towards my sister," Luna retorted. "I would tell myself that I'd let her know how I felt 'soon' and before I knew it I was blasting her through a wall in rage. You are tainted with the Nightmare just as I was. Its dark whispers will wear down your defenses as they did mine, until a dark parody of yourself is all that's left."

'Well,' Rarity thought to herself, *'that certainly explains why they weren't affected. Luna probably built up a tolerance from playing host for a thousand years and anyone currently infected is likely exempt from the effects. Which probably means little Nyx isn't affected either. Twilight will be happy to hear that. I guess my occasional stint as 'Nightmarity' is why I can still use some of the basics too.'*

"I can handle it," Blues insisted. "I'm not hearing whispers or words or anything. Just a barely perceptible prodding to act on some of my darker thoughts."

"And that is how it starts," Luna returned just as stubbornly.

"I've been dealing with these thoughts for longer than most think," Blues retorted. "The Nightmare isn't bringing anything new to the table."

"For your sake, I hope not," Luna relented as a messenger ran up to the two with news.

Zecora owed the Light family much, even if they would claim otherwise. She was not ignorant of the ways in which the world worked, and she had seen the suspicious looks the townsponies had thrown her when she'd arrived years ago. They had never seen a

zebra before, knew nothing about her ways or traditions, and they feared what was different and unfamiliar.

Except Dr. Light. He looked at the strange and unfamiliar with interest and wonder. He didn't look upon her setting up residence in the Everfree, a place rife with rare and potent ingredients for her potions and studies, as proof she was to be feared. No, he looked upon it with interest and sought to learn why. He came to her, braving the dangers of the Everfree, and sought to learn who she was and why she lived there.

She knew he hadn't needed to do that. Nor did he need to accompany her into town and vouch for her to all of the vendors. He *certainly* hadn't needed to put in an order for regular potion supplies and pay her so well for them.

And so, when the Nightmare had fallen over Equestria, she'd wasted no time. Magic may have been stifled, but there was a potion known to her that would counter the effects of such a curse upon the drinker that could still be brewed by one under the dark influence. The primary downside was that the ingredients were not only rare but also dangerous to work with. Not to mention when improperly brewed, the potion was quite hazardous.

She'd had just enough for two doses. One for her to chase away the dark aches so the forest did not catch her unawares and one for the good doctor so he would be at his best.

She hadn't expected him to already be at work on a solution though. It had made her efforts seem... pointless. At least at first. Even though they already had the makings of a solution, the doctor and his like minded griffon friend had jumped on her brew and gotten the griffon's toad-like robot, newly shielded and made to analyze and reproduce liquids, to duplicate her brew. If what they claimed was true, her contribution had cut several day's work down to one.

And now they had come to Canterlot in the hopes they could restore the stallion's mechanical children, and any others who needed it.

"Thou art certain this shall work?" Luna looked at the contraptions dubiously. "As we understand it, artificially made potions are... magically inert."

The princess of the night hoped she didn't look as ragged as she felt. Raising both the moon and sun, even if their light was stifled by the curse of darkness, was tiring enough. Dealing with Equestria in a crisis without her sister to help was taking its toll though.

"The process by which we make this brew, makes it impotent that is true," the zebra mare, Zecora if she recalled correctly, replied as she placed a hoof on the shoulder of a black metal alicorn. The one made from the remnants of the Nightmare energy that had corrupted her. "But add the power of dark benign, and you will find it works just fine."

"I just put magic into it, that's all," The artificial alicorn filly looked like she would have blushed were she capable.

"Well, magic's what we need to make it work, so you do a bang-up job, ribbit!" the metal frog-thing, Rain Toad made by the griffon scientist Dr. Cossack as he had been introduced, chimed in. Some contraption originally meant to do the job of a pegasus by seeding rain during droughts, and adapted to analyze water composition and then reproduce it for later and further analysis by others. Currently adapted to mass produce Zecora's darkness protection potion.

"We're ready," Dr. Light announced as he finished activating the miraculously working cylinders. He'd been busy it seemed adapting the chambers to work under this infernal curse and then getting his creations and his companion's running so they could haul them here. All to save his metal foals. That it could be used to cure ponies was a welcome addition, but Luna wanted to see it work first.

"Alrighty everypony!" Applejack, bearer of Honesty, called to the others. "Let's lower them two in nice and gentlelike!"

As Luna watched, the metallic saviors of Equestria two times over were lowered into the clear cylinders, hooked up to various devices that went way over Luna's head, and then submerged in the artificial potion over their heads.

"You're up Nyx," Rainbow Dash, the bearer of Loyalty, told the robot alicorn filly.

"Right," the named filly, and metal daughter of the bearer of Magic, stepped up and began infusing the liquid with her power.

Rock came back online in a way that was much more familiar than he liked to admit.

Submerged in a vat of liquid after being unexpectedly forced offline.

'Damnit, I was sure *we wouldn't have to deal with Ra Moon this Loop!'* he cursed Equestria's current lack of a centralized database he could readily access. The Lanfront ruins didn't exist every Loop, and their existence was sometimes classified, but he'd gotten used to knowing about the possibility in advance.

"This is most promising," he heard Luna muse as he was extracted from the tank by Guts Stallion and... was that an Equestrian variant of Ring Man? He looked like a griffon. Off to the side Roll was being helped out by Elec Mare and some sphinx-like version of Pharaoh Man. And... yep, that looked like the griffon Dr. Cossack over there with his niece Gilda and Rock's dad. Blues was giving him the 'we need to talk soon' signal over by an equine Bright Man, his head-mounted bulb illuminating the room. And over there was a beaming Nyx with Zecora, some version of Toad Man, and what looked like Skull Man imagined as a zebra.

It worked for him.

"Ye must prepare to repeat this treatment immediately," the lunar princess continued. "First the bearers so that we may possibly regain

the Elements of Harmony to turn against this mysterious and dishonorable foe, and then my sister if possible."

"Princess!" a frantic guard scrambled inside. "There is someone claiming responsibility for this catastrophe outside! He is demanding to speak with you and your 'champions' immediately!"

"Pray, tell us," Rock heard the titanium alloy in the princess's voice, "what is the name of this brazen knave?"

"He calls himself Ahuizotl Terra, leader of the Star Druids," the guard responded.

'Well,' Rock thought in shock, *'that might be what Blues wanted to tell me.'*

Applejack swore as she listened to this odd version of Ahuizotl gloat over what he'd done. If she still had full control over her earthbending, she'd have been happy to give the varmint a round of applause. Him and his giant green headdress right between a pair of granite applauders, eeyup.

"Don't princess," she heard Rock warn Luna off from trying to vaporize the smug... whatever he was. "He looks too confident. He's got something up his sleeve."

The problem with her earthbending was that this shroud of darkness, or whatever it was, was interferin' with her control. If she tried something it could easily be too weak and do nothin' or too strong and turn him into a smear. And while the latter option was soundin' better with every sound outta his smug mouth, her aim wasn't all that hot either at the moment. She could just as easily smash one a' the ponies who'd come to see what all the hullabaloo was about.

"Oh, come princess," Ahuizotl grinned in his blue and white regalia and red helmet that sported the massive green headdress. Had ta be

enchanted the way he was flauntin' it. "You aren't... frightened, are you?"

"Of thou?" Luna scoffed. "A coward who hides behind magical toys? Not at all. Thou art simply not worth sullying ourself over. Thou shalt face our champion instead."

"Why, that sounds thrilling!" Ahuizotl laughed. "In fact, why not send two? In fact, I'll allow *three* if you can find that many who aren't crippled! It won't make any difference!"

Luna scowled at the pompous something-or-other while Applejack made a mental note to ask Twilight what his dang species was when she woke up.

"Don't worry princess," Roll assured her. "We can handle him."

"Nevertheless," Luna began before turning back to Ahuizotl. "If thou art so confident, ye shall not object to us bestowing a blessing upon our champions."

"I'd have it no other way," the villain grinned.

"Very well," Luna nodded and lowered her horn to the two robots and whispered to them, low enough that Applejack had to strain to hear, as she cast a spell. "This protection shall shield thee both from anything the foul miscreant can bring to bear. End this quickly so that we can restore peace to our little ponies' lives."

"We will," they both promised and strode out to meet their opponent.

"Well," Ahuizotl mused pleasantly as he rubbed his chin, "since your dear princess is allowed to grant a boon to her champions it seems only fair that I begin this contest, wouldn't you say?"

The robot pony siblings looked at each other before replying together. "If you must."

"Perfect," Ahuizotl's grin threatened to carve the top of his skull away from his body as his hand-tail thing, sporting some red glove gauntlet doohicky, rose up over his head and pointed two fingers at the duo. "Spark Chaser."

It was over in a horrifying instant. The lasers that fired forth punched straight through Luna's protection spell and their metal bodies. And then it *cornered in midair* to hit them again. And again. And again. The sparking and smoldering forms of the twin heroes of Equestria hit the ground before what had happened had finished registering for anypony watching.

"Victory!" Ahuizotl laughed. "And now you all see just how powerless you are against just *one* of our little group of Star Druids! Even the magic your precious alicorn princess is no match for our new strength!" The monster chuckled sinisterly. "And there's more of us. Surrender to the Age of Eternal Darkness. Or wither away slowly."

Applejack noted that Luna looked darn near ready to charge the piece of trash regardless of the fact that he'd carved through one of her best protection spells like it was made of warm butter. Hay, Applejack was ready to join her.

But then the music started. (13)

Quiet at first, barely noticeable, but it slowly increased in volume. A somber melody came forth and Applejack found herself rooted in place as a familiar feeling washed over her.

'Who the buck is triggerin' a Heartsong now *?!'* she thought incredulously. Trying to break the spell of a heartsong was technically possible, but rarely ended well. *'What, is the stinkin' varmint gonna gloat ta music now?'* And then she saw Rock and Roll begin to stand up. *'You gotta be kiddin' me...* They're *tha ones doing this?'*

The impact of getting the last of their hooves under them coincided with a pulsing drumbeat that ended the instrumentals as Rock began

to sing.

"I think we've played this song before

The melody is different, but I hear the drums of war."

Drum beats heralded the return of the instrumentals as Applejack realized what was happening as Roll stepped forward. Those two were trying to trigger a heartsong to turn this fight around... Was that even possible?

"So it seems our mission is the same

What always ends in bloodshed, begins as just a game."

Applejack blinked at the somber tone of the song as the two robots prepared to sing together. That wasn't typical Equestrian heartsong material.

"History repeating...

Who do they call when villains need defeating?

History repeating...

Who do we call when we're broken and bleeding?"

It dawned on her that this must be something from their home Loop. They clearly had experience with music as well as fighting. Maybe they'd had both at the same time before. But then Ahuizotl smiled and stepped forward. Chlorophyll... He was going to try and turn the heartsong against them...

"What have we here, you two want to be the ones?

But what you must realize is... that you're the only ones!

So here we are, beginning a new age

Get the players set; it's time that war we wage."

Applejack watched, bound by the heartsong as a spectator, as Ahuizotl lowered his tail-hand and the laser gauntlet with it. The varmint was so confident he wasn't going to use his alicorn-busting superweapon. He was intendin' to show them all that he could beat the heroes of Equestria with his bare limbs!

"History repeated...

Who can they call with the heroes defeated?

Our dark story completed...

What hope will they have with you two deleted?"

Applejack grit her teeth as the instrumentals swelled in volume and then began to increase in pace. Faster and faster as the combatants stared each other down across the courtyard.

And when the music shifted, they were off like shots. They met in the center, trading unarmed blows. Ahuizotl's fist cratered the marble as the twin heroes dodged and counterattacked. They moved so fluidly and struck so solidly that it would be hard to believe they had really been injured so badly if the wounds were not plainly visible.

Ahuizotl swept the area around him and the two jumped clear and fired their weapons before Rock picked up the song again.

"We stand before a moment of truth,"

He sounded much more determined now. The feeling of sadness was gone, replaced by determination as Roll continued for him.

"With all Equestria's fate in our hooves."

Applejack had to smirk as Ahuizotl snarled at them and they sang together.

"Today, the end begins..."

Then the villain grinned and began to try and twist the song again as the two charged him.

"Come and let the battle be born

This war that we fight is a thundering storm

Today, the end begins..."

She saw Rock gritting his teeth as blows were exchanged again and he tried to wrest the flow of the song back.

"If it was up to me

I'd rewrite history

And change our destiny

One last time"

The two robots began peppering Ahuizotl with buster shots from range and staying out of his reach until he got frustrated and leapt at them. He missed, but the blow from his boosted strength created a shockwave that knocked them back anyway. They managed to land on their hooves and dug grooves into the ground and picked up the song before renewing their assault.

"Betrayed our promise of peace

This is the last time we're the Mega Ponies

Today, we change the end"

Applejack noticed Ahuizotl getting frustrated at how this fight wasn't as easy as he'd been expecting and he raised his tail-hand with the laser gauntlet again. It was clear he was intending to fry them completely, heartsong influence or no. She was about to try and

shout a warning when Ahuizotl's gauntlet was struck by an energy blast out of nowhere and a red-armored earth pony with a shield, scarf, and shaded visor landed between the two heroes and joined the song.

"Hey, Rock. My weapon is hot

It's time to throw down; Let's show what we got

Today, we change the end..."

Ahuizotl snarled in rage and pain as all three charged him again and rejoined the song in anger.

"Now you listen to me!

You can't stop this story!

No changing destiny!

Not this time!"

Blows were traded fast and furious, and Applejack noticed Ahuizotl's armor building up energy. Just as she realized he had another trick up his durned sleeve, a wave of energy burst forth from him flinging all three of his opponents back. Rock and Roll landed badly, but the red-armored pony, who had to be Blues she figured, had managed to block with his shield and land on his hooves.

And strangely, Ahuizotl seemed to calm down suddenly and sang at Blues in an almost friendly manner.

"Come now, why do you fight?

You know that only we are right!

They cannot win, they can only fall,

And no choice you can make will

Change that at all!"

Blues glared back at the villain and didn't even miss a beat before retorting defiantly.

"I know they can win, They've done it before

Now put up your dukes, and let's settle this score

One last time!"

As the two charged and clashed, Applejack heard the whispers rocket through the crowd like Rainbow Dash breaching the warp barrier. And as one, practically everyone reached the same conclusion and cheered:

"HE'S THE PROTOTYPE MANE OF MEGA MANE!"

And then she heard Luna of all ponies join the song.

"It shall be up to thee

To rewrite this story

And change thy destiny

One last time"

And Applejack found she couldn't help repeating that last line as Blues clobbered Ahuizotl with an uppercut from his shield, making him stagger back and clutch his face in pain.

"One last TIME!"

Ahuizotl growled as he moved his hand and everyone could see his eye bleeding as he began singing again.

"You can't stop this you'll see

You'll face our dark story

And meet your destiny

Come next time!"

And as the music began to draw itself out for the end of the heartsong, Ahuizotl was bathed in magical light as he prepared to teleport. But not before tossing out a farewell line.

"Yes.. next time..."

Twilight blinked as she came to in a vat of liquid.

'Another Star Wars Loop starting in a bacta tank?' she thought groggily. *'No, wait, I'm awake with a small 'a', not a capital one. Last Loop's still on. Tree, my everything hurts.'*

"Welcome back to the land of the living miss Sparkle," an unfamiliar griffon in glasses and a labcoat greeted her.

Twilight blinked again as she was hoisted out of the tank by a semi-poofy-maned Pinkie and took stock of the unusually dark palace room, lit primarily by an equine robot with a bulb on his head.

"Can anypony tell me what's been going on?"

Daring Do didn't look it, but she was frightened. Many would be surprised to find that this was a common state for her. After all, she'd faced death traps, dastardly villains, and magical doomsday devices. Sometimes all in the same day. But like she always reminded herself, it wasn't the fearless who succeeded in life, it was those who could face their fear. And at *that* she had long practice.

"Ahuizotl isn't the only one of my old foes who has gained new power," she informed the gathered Elements. She'd missed her arch

nemesis's arrival and duel partly due to being tapped with locating quarters for the arrivals from Ponyville in the midst of near oversaturation of refugees in the palace. The group of fillies (and one griffon chick) 'helping' hadn't sped the process up any.

Daring still had no idea where the tree sap had come from.

"Blues and I counted no less than eight other faces familiar to me from my past adventures as well. Each with their own new enchanted regalia and self-proclaimed titles. If you would please, doctor?"

"Of course, Daring," Dr. Cossack adjusted his glasses with a talon as he motioned for his light-bulb themed robot, Bright Mane, to operate the projector. A pegasus mare in cult attire appeared on the screen.

"For those of you who don't know," Daring began, "this is Desert Rose, an alternate version of a good friend of mine and the leader of a former cult whose purpose was to resurrect the Smooze."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Princess Luna.

"I'm afraid the news doesn't necessarily get better from there, Princess," Daring told the lunar diarch as the image shifted to show a different image of the same mare. Only this time she had an acid green coat color as well as a pink chestplate and helmet connected by a pair of tubes and her coat looked rubbery. Or gooey. "She was supposedly killed by the very Smooze she sought to control, dissolved into its mass, but apparently she merged with it instead and... yes, miss Pie?"

"Why would anypony want to do anything with Smooze?" the pink mare put down the hoof she'd been frantically waving while going 'ooh! ooh! ooh! pick me!'. "It's like no fun at all! It's negative fun! Heck, I'd go as far as to say it's anti-fun!"

"Honestly," Daring replied with a roll of her eyes, "I'd guess that every member of this group has something against others having

fun. They're not exactly a nice bunch. Desert Mercury, as she has now chosen to call herself, is just the tip of this iceberg."

The slide changed to show a zebra mare and this time it was Zecora who hissed.

"By my righteous burning fury," the potionmaker growled angrily, "is that the ever hated Zuri?"

"You know her?" Daring blinked in surprise.

"Only of the traitor do I know," Zecora admitted, "but home her face she dares not show. Foul betrayals she once committed and forever her name is now omitted."

"Complete erasure from Zebrican records?" Luna looked astonished. "That is a punishment most extreme! Even our actions as Nightmare Moon did not warrant being wiped from living memory! What villainy didst she commit to deserve such a fate?"

"Whatever it was," Daring replied as the slide switched to show the same zebra mare in yellow crab-like armor, "I suspect it was for money. She's Ahuizotl's favorite mercenary. She now goes by Zuri Venus and whatever power her armor gives her, it's explosive. Then there's this fellow."

As the image of a red dragon appeared, Luna rose in fury. **" *That* foul miscreant hath escaped his eternal bonds?!"**

"Sadly, yes," Daring, like most of the room, rubbed her ears. "I thought you might remember the time Inti tried to steal the power of Nightmare Moon before your return. Unfortunately, it seems that with your restoration the dark power you used to imprison him was similarly undone. He's going by Inti Mars now."

The image changed to the same dragon in heavy armor mounted with cannons. One was mounted on his head, one each on his forelimbs, and the shoulder pauldrons appeared to have several. He

was a living war machine. While the room took that image in, the slide changed to a menacing-looking griffon. The kind who made Gilda at her worst look cute and cuddly.

"Is that *Copperbeak* ?" Rainbow Dash gulped. The villain of Daring Do and the Griffon's Goblet had been one of the scarier ones in her opinion.

"Yes it is," Daring nodded as the image changed to show the griffon clad in green and yellow armor crackling with electricity. "Copperbeak Jupiter is the sky commander of this group and his armor has power over storms. Even if pegasus magic wasn't being shut down by the dark curse over Equestria, Copperbeak would be able to overpower any pegasi's control over the weather. I'm sorry, but even though the doctors' treatment restores the ability to use magic, I doubt any of us will have the raw strength to wrest control of his storms from him. As Ahuizotl's demonstration showed, their powers are alicorn tier."

"There are still other options," Dr. Cossack interjected. "While we may lack raw power, we have other resources. I'll be happy to go over them with you all once Daring has finished her briefing."

"Thank you doctor," Daring nodded as the image changed to show a bipedal tiger thing. A Rakshasa. "Anyway, this is Khara, a rakshasa who previously kidnapped elephants to feed on their pain and misery. Not a nice fellow, especially now he's been upgraded."

The image shifted to show the same being in brown armor with ring-like weapon so large he was standing in the middle of it.

"As Khara Saturn, he has even more terrifying powers than before and I didn't exactly stick around long enough to figure out what they were exactly," Daring admitted as the image switched to a positively immense minotaur. "Moving on, this guy is formerly known as the insane King Hammerhoof. And another foe I'd thought was dead. He looks like this now."

The image of the minotaur clad in red and yellow armor so thick as to double his body mass appeared.

"Good gracious!" Rarity gasped. "And I thought he looked like a brute before!"

"Brute is right," Blues answered for Daring this time. "That armor boosts his strength to unbelievable levels as Hammerhoof Uranus. When Daring was getting me out of there he tried to crush us with a several hundred tons of stone structures. Fortunately his aim is terrible."

"Not that it'll make a difference if he gets his hands on you," Daring reminded the group as the image changed to show a diamond dog. "This is Commandant Rex, a militant diamond dog who used to run a very successful slave trade." The image changed to show him in white fur garb with claw-like weapons at his wrists. "Now going by Pluto Rex, he's more dangerous than ever."

"He looks so cruel..." Fluttershy teared up.

"Up next is this bastard," Daring ignored the emotional pegasus as the image of a sea pony with a scraggly beard and pirate attire came up. As Applejack yelped and dove under the table, the rest noted that he seemed oddly transparent. "This guy is the formerly deceased pirate Blackmane, now Blackmane Neptune." The image changed to a definitely corporeal entity in blue and green armor with large white fins. "Among the other abilities his new armor grants him, he also apparently has a fully living body. Or at least a reasonable facsimile." (14)

"And we all know the next member of this group," Blues continued as the picture of the thing that had dueled he and his siblings not even an hour prior appeared. "Ahuizotl, now going by Ahuizotl Terra. One of the more persistent and prolific villains in the world with a penchant for seeking out mystical artifacts of power to aid his delusions of conquest. But even worse is who he seems to have recruited for his latest scheme."

The image of Dr. Wily appeared, causing a round of nods from some and winces from others.

"Dr. Wily Plan has proved to be an Equestria-wide threat with nothing more than his own intelligence and inventions before," Blues reminded the group. "And now he's enhancing a group of alicorn-level villains with that same warped genius to unknown ends. Ends involving the phrase 'Eternal Night' and this:"

The image was now a giant black orb with red markings that made it look like a closed eye.

"The artifact of Le Mu, or Ra Moon according to some translations," Daring took over. "Housed in the Lanfront ruins, ancient texts believe it to be the source of dark magic. Thanks to Blues I can now confirm that this artifact is the source of the Nightmare Force that once corrupted Princess Luna and now fuels the curse of darkness that shrouds Equestria."

"Order, order!" Twilight proclaimed as she presided over the meeting of loopers. Celestia had been treated, but instead of recovering completely the solar princess was barely conscious. She was weak and constantly tired to the point where staying awake was a feat in and of itself. Luna was currently doing her best to get Celestia back to as much health as possible. Dash had been taken care of rather fortuitously when Daring had asked her about her work at Light Labs and Gilda had tagged along to catch up on old times. The three had last been seen deep in energetic conversation with no end in sight. As for the doctors, they had tapped the expanded crusaders (Kalinka apparently having been inducted at some point) to help distribute the cure to the guard, which left the loopers to their own devices.

"Oh, honestly Twilight," Rarity rolled her eyes in exasperation. "We're all here and hanging on your every word. There's no need to call us to order."

"I think she just likes saying it," Pinkie chirped as she idly tried to get her mane back to its normal poofiness. "Kinda like you still use that couch of yours even though–"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Rarity sniffed. She was still feeling a little out of sorts. Spike hadn't responded to the treatment as well as the rest. Sure being unconscious was technically an improvement over the delirious ramblings he'd been on since opening his mind to the Force had allowed it to be warped by the curse, but he was still not back to normal. She'd gone Loops without her husband Awake before, but having him here but incapacitated was just... worse somehow. To be so close yet so far...

"Oh, whatever," Applejack huffed. "Let's just get on with it."

"Fine," Twilight huffed as Rock and Roll grinned and Blues smirked.

"You seem happy," Fluttershy whispered as Twilight shuffled her notes and prepared to speak.

"You just seem like really good friends is all," Roll smiled.

"Okay," Twilight declared. "To recap: Thanks to the doctors and Zecora, we have our magic back, but not all of it. Our non-Loop native abilities are also sort of working again as Applejack kindly tested out, but our power levels are still not a hundred percent. Essentially, we're all back to the upper end of baseline for us rather than the accumulated power we've become used to. Ascending to alicorn is currently not an option. Whatever this curse is, it *really* doesn't like alicorns. Celestia's current state after anti-curse treatment is proof enough of that. In addition, the Elements themselves are inert for the foreseeable future, removing that option as well. And if that wasn't enough, pretty much anything useful in our subspace pockets is rendered technologically and magically inert, or worse, the moment we remove it so we can't count on any of *that* either."

The unicorn Anchor took a deep breath before continuing. "According to Rock and Roll, the foes from their Loop being emulated are called the Stardroids and each is incredibly powerful. Enough to possibly give us a run for our money even if we were at full strength. On our side of the equation, each member of the group is a foe of Daring Do from her adventures which could be real or fictional depending on the variant. They're all highly ruthless and very dangerous. Rock, if you would please?"

"No problem," the newly repaired robot agreed as he took the floor. "In our Loop, Ra Moon is an alien supercomputer dedicated to wiping out all life on the planet to pave the way for its 'children', the Stardroids. It's one of the less pleasant events we go through but fortunately it doesn't happen every Loop. We did our best to check for indicators that it existed, but we didn't find any until now. Anyway, the current variant appears to be an ancient artifact to fuel 'Eternal Night' and Blues says there's no indication it has any form of awareness. The ultimate goal is to enter the Lanfront ruins and destroy the artifact. As it's the source for the dark shroud over Equestria, that should remove its influence and restore magic to all of Equestria, including the Elements of Harmony."

"Assuming there are no complications," Blues added.

"Complications?" Twilight cocked her head inquisitively. "Like what?"

"Like Sunstar," Rock intoned as Roll nodded gravely. "He's normally the true leader of the Stardroids and a doomsday weapon that we can never get around fighting. The only good news is that 'Eternal Night' really doesn't fit his style, so we may not have to face a version of him."

"Well, here's hopin'," Applejack voiced what the rest were thinking.

"Sister..." Celestia wheezed from her bed as various ponies fussed over her. "You can... not be... serious..."

"We have never been more serious, dear sister," Luna insisted gently. "This foul magic is an attack not only on Equestria and her sovereignty, but upon all the world as well. Magic has been stripped from the populace and the land. Most all fantastic technological advances made since our banishment lie inert. The Elements of Harmony themselves hath been rendered dormant. We cannot in good conscience send our little ponies to face this threat when we ourselves are unwilling to go."

"Eques...tria... needs...you," Celestia coughed. "Our... little... ponies need... their... princess of the night... to lead them... in dark times..."

"Our little ponies need the sun," Luna nuzzled her bedridden sister affectionately. "They need an end to the darkness. And we shall see it done."

"Even protected from the dark influence of the shroud that emanates from it, and before these 'Star Druids' are taken into account, the Lanfront ruins are a dangerous place," Dr. Cossack explained to the task force that had been assembled for the purpose of infiltrating the ruins and taking out the source of the dark curse over the land. In addition to the Elements of Harmony, Daring Do, and the Light siblings; Zecora and Gilda had volunteered to join the expedition. He wasn't particularly happy about his niece going to fight opponents who could apparently cut through alicorn magic with little effort, but he couldn't reasonably stop her.

He could, however, send help.

"Which is why Dr. Light and I have enhanced my series of robot masters to strengthen this group," he continued. "Each of you will be paired with one of them. The mission is to engage the various Star Druids and keep them occupied while Daring Do and the Lights infiltrate the ruins and destroy the artifact of Le Mu. I've put together teams to best compliment each pair's individual abilities. Miss Pie, you are with–"

"Rain Toad!" Pinkie interrupted cheerfully.

"Ah, actual–"

"Gotta be him!" Pinkie cut the griffon doctor off again.

"...May I ask why?" Dr. Cossack sighed.

"Because if I'm gonna rain on their parade, I should have somefrog who can use actual rain!" Pinkie smiled. (15)

"Er..."

"Just go with it," Twilight told him. "Knowing Pinkie, it'll all work out."

"But..." the griffon scratched his head, "then who shall I pair up Zecora with?"

"Your robot with the skeleton mane, shall suit me better than the rain," Zecora informed him, before smirking. "It shall be good voodoo that we do."

"Ah..." the griffon scientist looked even more lost. "I was going to have him protect Fluttershy. And I still have no one to pair with Dust Bunny."

"A BUNNY?!" the sudden yell caused everyone present to turn and look at a now blushing Fluttershy. "Er... I mean, I'll volunteer to go with him. If that's okay with you..."

"I... suppose that works out then," Dr. Cossack adjusted his glasses. "Moving on... Applejack, I understand your connection with the Elements has allowed you to develop earth moving powers?"

"Somethin' like that," Applejack carefully didn't reveal where she'd *really* gotten such abilities from.

"Yes," Cossack nodded, "that will make you a good partner for my tunnelling model, Drill Dog. I understand miss Rarity has an affinity

for enchantments and gemstones?"

"And fabulousness darling, don't forget that," the unicorn looper winked to let the room know she was trying to lighten the mood.

"Of course," the griffon scientist nodded. "Well, Bright Mane should help you dazzle and daze your opponents. Rainbow Dash, my niece tells me you're quite the flyer."

"Best in Equestria!" Dash boasted.

"That remains to be seen," Dr. Cossack smirked. "Regardless, she also tells me that you're an accomplished martial artist. Thus you'll be paired with Ring Tercel, my contribution to the Griffon Empire's National Guard. You will be the primary combat pair. While all of you will likely be engaged with the Star Druids in combat, the two of you will be the ones most up close and personal. Hit hard, hit fast, and get the buck back out of range before they can retaliate."

"Yes, sir!" Dash saluted seriously.

"Twilight, you and Dive Serpent with his homing munitions will be long range support," Dr. Cossack continued, getting a nod from the unicorn. "Which brings me to the last pair."

"You better not have me sidelined uncle," Gilda growled indignantly.

"Far from it, my dear Gilda," Cossack sighed. "You and Pharaoh Sphinx have perhaps the most dangerous job of all. While the rest draw out the Star Druids, you will be following the main strike team in for the purpose of engaging any remaining defenses while they continue on ahead. It will be only the two of you against whatever remaining opposition there is so the strike team isn't delayed, with no chance for backup."

Gilda swallowed a bit nervously, but managed a salute in reply.

"Rock, Roll, Blues," Cossack addressed the Lights, "your father and I managed to cobble together an upgrade for your copy chips. You should be able to replicate, at least partially, the enchantments on the Star Druids' regalias in addition to an expanded active weapon memory and the master weapons of my own creations. Hopefully, this will give you any extra edge needed. Your father's reactivated creations will be staying behind to protect Canterlot along with the Equestrian Royal Guard in case the Star Druids attack here. I only wish we could afford to send more help. These are, after all, enemies with strength comparable to an alicorn each."

"You may not, noble doctor, but we shall," the regal voice of Princess Luna joined the group. "If these blackguards bring strength equal to the alicorn race, then ye too shall have the strength of an alicorn to aid ye! Your princess of the night is joining you to put an end to this curse of lightlessness!"

"Wait, so you've heard about this 'Le Mu' thing before?" Rainbow Dash inquired of the princess as the group rode the royal air yacht to the Lanfront ruins.

"Indeed we have," Luna admitted, "though the tale was ancient when we and our sister were but fillies ourselves and we thought it nothing more than an old tale to frighten young ones. It appears that is not the case."

"You know," Twilight mused as she examined her Loop memories more closely, "I think I came across the legend myself once. Something about the first alicorn?"

"Indeed," Luna replied as the others, of flesh and steel alike, gathered around her to hear the tale. "Le Tor was his name and for thousands of years the tellings of his deeds caused the alicorn race to be viewed as cursed. It was only when Celestia and ourself vanquished the spirit of chaos with the Elements of Harmony that opinion shifted."

Rock and Roll in particular listened closely. If Le Mu was the current variant of Ra Moon, then Le Tor was obviously meant to be Ra Thor. A super robot who had never had a personality that they'd encountered. It would be interesting to hear how he had been different this time.

"It is said that Le Tor was once a noble and just ruler over all ponykind in the ancient past, even before magic was well understood or the rift between the three tribes formed," Luna began. "But he grew greedy and selfish and his heart turned to darkness. He delved into dark magics and became cruel and unforgiving, forged armor of terrible dark power to wear, and eventually created the artifact of Le Mu and used it to imprison the sun. The entire world was seemingly cast into darkness eternal until, as the legends say, an order of unicorns known as the Magi came together to pool their mystical abilities and raise the sun by sheer force of will."

"What happened to the bastard then?" Gilda asked, intrigued.

"The legends say that the Magi then led all three tribes and chased the wicked alicorn out of their lands by force, the might of the unicorn order rendering his dark powers useless. He fled with the artifact of Le Mu to a distant land never to be seen again. And the ponies, thankful for the return of the life-giving sun, made the unicorn order their rulers. The pegasi swore to their defense and the earth ponies to the production of their food so the unicorns could forever focus on maintaining the cycle of days. And of course, the tale of Hearth's Warming tells us how that eventually worked out."

"Yes," Twilight turned that over in her mind. It sounded a little off in some respects and she wondered if the unicorn nobles of the time had... tailored the tale to inflate their own sense of importance. But it would be impossible to know for sure.

"Heeheehee!" Desert Mercury cackled as she saw the Equestrian airship in the distance. "Looks like the doc was right. They *are* foolish enough to come right to us!"

"More fools them," Zuri Venus scowled intently. "Copperbeak? You're up." (16)

"Heh-heh-heh..." the armored griffon chuckled as he rubbed his gauntlets together, electricity sparking between them as storm clouds formed in the sky around the airship. "This is gonna be fun... And Venus? Call me Jupiter."

A massive bolt of lightning split the sky and the ship, sending it to the ground in a flaming wreck.

"Well," Pluto Rex grinned. "I'm sure a few of them survived that. Let's go hunting."

"Smash them all!" Hammerhoof Uranus agreed enthusiastically.

"Yes," Inti Mars rumbled in anticipation. "It has been too long since I had decent sport."

"Ye and me both landlubber," Blackmane Neptune smirked from the river.

"Is everyone okay?" Rock and Twilight asked at the same time. The storm had come up unnaturally quick, making it an obvious attack. However, while most had believed that it was meant to aid incoming hostiles, and had thus gone on watch for them, Princess Luna had divined that the storm was, in fact, the main attack and had teleported the entire group to the ground and out of harm's way before the air yacht was destroyed.

"A little shaken sugarcubes," Applejack replied from where she was scanning the surrounding area.

"But not stirred!" Pinkie grinned despite the fact that not everyone present got the reference and even fewer appreciated its use at the moment.

"Tis not the time for frivolity," Luna admonished the Element of Laughter. "Our foes shall not believe us so easily dispatched. We must make haste to our goal."

"We need to spread out," Gilda told them. "Big groups are big targets and we're probably not gonna have much warning when they find us."

"Gilda's right," Rainbow agreed. "Strength in numbers isn't gonna mean much when they can toss around big moves like that one. We need to pair off and split up."

"Keep your communicators hot," Blues added, tapping his helmet and reminding the non-robots present of the devices fitted to their ears. "Contact the rest if you engage the Star Druids. Do your best to take them out one by one and keep the way clear for the strike team. Luna, you're with Rock and Roll in Strike 1. We're probably going to need you against whatever's waiting for us in there. Daring and I will be close by as Strike 2 with Gilda and Pharaoh Sphinx covering us."

"Everyone got your partners?" Roll checked, getting a round of nods.

"Then let's move out!" Rock declared and began galloping towards the Lanfront ruins.

Dr. Wily cackled as he observed the view of Canterlot in his video feed. Ahuizotl had been sent back from the seat of Equestrian government with his scorched hand-tail between his legs despite his gloating that he could conquer the city on his own in its weakened state.

Wily, however, knew that his old friend and colleague would have been able to work something out. That's what Bright Light (and why did some part of his mind want to call the stallion Thomas? What a strange name...) did after all. So he'd joined in the bet the rest had done over how Ahuizotl would fail, the prize being command of the next phase of the plan. Inti bet he'd lose to Luna, Zuri had wagered

he'd fall to Daring as was usual for him, Copperbeak had bet on a timely griffon intervention, Rex claimed the guards would emerge victorious though with losses, Hammerhoof had bet on the longshot of the royal guard with no losses, Blackmane insisted on the slightly less longshot of a ragtag bunch of misfits, Khara thought he'd somehow manage to do himself in, and Desert believed that the Equestrians would whip out some forgotten and forbidden dark magic. But he'd won by wagering that Dr. Light's creations would be Ahuizotl's undoing on that errand. After all, he knew firsthoof how capable they were.

It was why he'd insisted on restoring and enhancing the armors and regalias that had been found here. The ingenuity of the ancient order that had made them was astounding, make no mistake, but it was nothing he couldn't improve upon.

Even if he'd needed a little help from the master artifact to do it.

In any case, he had a genius plan. The nine outfitted members would remain at the ruins to meet the forces that would be sent against them. While he? He would send his latest and greatest project, an artifact at least as ancient and powerful as anything his nine partners now wielded that he had restored and improved upon, back to Canterlot while its most capable champions were away. All under his direct control.

Should these 'heroes' defeat their group, he would already have the ultimate collection of hostages to secure their unconditional surrender.

Luna nearly forgot the plan when the dragon, Inti Mars, burst out of the treeline, scattering several trees with his size. But when her two companions, rather than stand and fight, merely dashed past the beast (17) she recalled their words:

"We can't stop to engage unless there's no other choice. I know you'll want to protect the others from danger. We will too. But there's

a time for protecting others and a time to realize others are capable of protecting themselves. This is the latter. So we don't stop unless we have to."

"Cowards!" the war dragon yelled after them as they raced away from him. "Come back and face me!"

"Hold it right there, mister!" the stern voice of Fluttershy could be heard behind them before the three were too far away to make out words.

Pinkie and Rain Toad were advancing through the jungle when a blast of energy tore through Pinkie's mane. Strangely, it didn't seem to do any harm. Instead it grabbed one of her party petards that she always kept handy and carried it back to the shooter.

"Well, well," the shooter's sinister voice made itself known, "if it isn't the ever-so-happy Element of Laughter. I was hoping I'd run into you."

"Really?" Pinkie asked cheerfully as Desert Mercury stepped into her view. "Did you want a party? I'm kind of busy right now, but I think I can squeeze you in for a quick small one!"

"I hate parties," Desert Mercury punctuated the statement by crushing the party munitions she'd stolen with her weapon.

Pinkie's mane almost deflated again as her shock broke her concentration. "W-what?"

"You heard me," the acid green mare glared at Equestria's premier party pony. "I hate parties. I hate laughter. I hate seeing the clueless brain-dead masses go about their happy way. Why do you think I wanted to revive the Smooze? So I could erase that inane pointless happiness once and for all!"

Pinkie took a step back at the insane look in the armored mare's eyes and bumped into her companion. Turning to look at him, she saw him nod reassuringly. He had her back, no matter what.

"And now I *am* the Smooze!" Desert Mercury laughed as her body rippled and flowed menacingly. "And I will destroy all happiness!"

"Hey, Ringer, hold up," Rainbow told her wing-bot. "I know we're supposed to support the others, but that storm cloud's not sitting right by me. I think we should make it our priority."

"The idea is sound," Ring Tercel allowed before pointing at a figure in the sky, revealed only by the lightning. "But what about the storm's master?"

"Hmmm..." Rainbow mused for a moment. "Okay, here's the plan..."

"Come on out and I'll make this quick!" Zuri called to her hidden quarry as she stalked ever closer. "Honestly, it's nothing personal, but you shouldn't have involved yourself in things like this that are way over your heads."

The brush rustled a bit and she smirked.

"And now you're going to lose them," the zebra mercenary smirked as she unleashed the exploding bubbles her armor's magic allowed her to create.

The brush blew apart impressively as expected, but there was a distinct lack of remains left behind.

"That is how you track one like me?" the metered voice of a shaman mare taunted from behind her. "Who lives in the forest ever free?"

"So," Zuri retorted in a low voice, trying to hide the innate fear that revelation instilled in her, "they sent a medicine mare after me?"

"Nay," the unfamiliar zebra replied as she stepped from the brush, "you were punished for your crime. To seek you out is not worth my time. But the reality now is stark. The world chafes under eternal dark."

"Sanctimonious holier than thou..." the mercenary growled.

"It matters not who is wrong or right," the zebra replied calmly. "We must purge the dark and return the light."

"I'll purge *you* !"

Twilight, by virtue of her aquatic companion, had taken the river.

"Avast ye weakling bilge rats!"

As should have been expected, they were stopped by the aquatic member of their opponents.

"I hate pirates," Twilight grumbled as she and Dive Serpent prepared to face off against Blackmane Neptune.

"Can't say I'm all that fond of them me'self lass," the robotic river serpent agreed.

Hammerhoof Uranus bellowed as he pried his helmet off of his face and back atop his head. The blue robot pony would pay for that humiliation! Turning frantically to seek his opponent, he spotted him nearby and charged.

"Tarnation!" The pony in question wasn't blue. Nor a robot. Heck, she wasn't even male.

The enraged and empowered minotaur really didn't care at this point.

"Well, well," Pluto Rex grinned as he traced a claw over the captured unicorn's face, "aren't you a pretty pony? Yes, you'll fetch a fine price when this is over."

"Why do I always attract the unwashed brutes?" Rarity sighed to herself, trying to not think about the unclean feeling.

"Insult me all you want, pretty pony," the diamond dog grinned sadistically, "you'll change your tune soon enough."

"Ugh!" Rarity spat and closed her eyes. "I don't think so. Any time Bright Mane!"

"And just what do you think your useless companion can do?" Pluto Rex taunted, before promptly being blinded by a bright flash of light.

"Oh, nothing much," Rarity simpered condescendingly as her opponent howled and clutched his eyes. Honestly, what did he expect with eyes so adjusted to darkness meeting the brightest bulb in all the lands?

Blues cursed under his breath as he grappled with Khara Saturn. The Rakshasa had ambushed them as they drew close to the ruins and knocked Daring to the ground. Even the fact that he'd copied the felinoid's weapon wasn't improving his mood. The felinoid was strong and had all the leverage right now, which meant Blues was in a bad position.

And then all of a sudden the weight of his opponent was slammed off of him. Turning to look, he saw Gilda roll off of Khara Saturn right as Pharaoh Sphinx unleashed a charged Pharaoh Shot.

"Go!" Gilda called to him and Daring, who was now returning to her feet, "we've got this loser!"

Blues simply nodded and ran for the entrance to the ruins, Daring close behind him.

Ahuizotl Terra grinned as he watched the three intrepid explorers pass by without noticing him. He wasn't going to engage them. No, he had a score to settle with the red one who was even now approaching as well. And an older score to settle with the hated Daring Do with him.

These three he'd let the doctor deal with.

Humming cheerfully to himself, he pulled a lever that caused a wall to slide closed behind the three. Now they couldn't return to interfere, and Daring and the red one could proceed no further.

Dr. Wily scowled as he saw Ahuizotl let his nemeses and the princess through his checkpoint. It was... not unexpected to be honest. Far from ideal, but not unexpected.

"Well, my brain damaged friend," he addressed a special variant of his Devil Core, "it looks like you will get to have revenge on one of the ones responsible for your state after all."

The Devil Core was constructed around the most fascinating magical artifact. One that could summon an otherwise bodiless presence to be interrogated. And with his improvements and melding with his Devil Series technology, the presence would have both a body and the ability to defend against intruders.

"Yes, you shall have your revenge..." he chuckled. "You shall have revenge for both of us."

Celestia's blood ran cold as her captain of the guard used his newly restored magic and displayed an image of the figure approaching Canterlot. It was tall, taller than her, covered in armor over every inch of its body, and most tellingly of all it was an alicorn.

One she recognized from the stories and legends her mother used to tell her and Luna.

"It... *can't* ... be..." she gasped out. But her eyes, tired as they were, told her otherwise.

The legendary first alicorn, Le Tor, the evil being who had once imprisoned the sun, a figure that had featured prominently in her foalhood nightmares since the day she earned her cutie mark, was advancing on Canterlot.

On her.

Rock and Roll had jumped when the section of wall slammed closed behind them, honestly expecting that they'd accidentally tripped a trap of some sort. Even with long experience raiding the Lanfront in their baseline, they still tended to miss some of those things every so often.

"T'would appear our regress is barred to us," Luna observed as she finished scanning the wall. "It is no matter as our goal lies ahead and not behind."

"True," Rock allowed, though in his experience having exits barred always meant something nasty was ahead.

And as they entered the next chamber, he wasn't disappointed.

There before them was a Devil Core, etched in runes that first began to glow and then emit black smoke that positively pulsed with dark magic. As the mystic smoke began to form the standard body shape for the Devil Series, Rock reflected that this was the first version he'd seen that had a gaseous body. The body finished forming and the eye opened menacingly...

And Princess Luna gasped in shock at its appearance.

The single eye had a sickly green sclera, an angry red iris, and a sinister purple aura that seemed to bleed power from the eyeball itself. **"Crrr...rrry...yyss...sstt...taa...aal...lss...?"** the thing rumbled slowly and unsurely.

"Sombra...?" Luna whispered in recognition and disbelief. "Sombra DarkMoon? How?"

The evil eye then focused on Luna and the beast seemed to gain a measure of clarity.

"LLLUUNNAAAA!" It roared with hate and rage.

Inti Mars was utterly flummoxed. He was used to ponies and other small creatures either cowering in terror or engaging him in battle. He wasn't used to small winged soft-looking ponies trying to stare him into submission as if he was an unruly hatchling.

The strange creature next to the pony that looked like the union of a rabbit and a vacuum cleaner wasn't even a contestant in how unnerving the experience was.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" the pony scolded him. "Just because you're bigger than everyone else is no excuse to bully them! What would your mother think?"

That last part snapped him out of it. The reference to his *mother* … (18)

"My *mother* ..." he growled at the pony, who seemed surprised that he was acting like the grand dragon he was rather than a mere stripling she was treating him as, "was a vile old *lizard* . And my only regret..."

The pony took an instinctive step back as the cannons the mad doctor pony had added to his magic armor began to glow with power.

" *Is that I didn't kill her myself!* "

Zuri Venus brayed in fury. The shaman's illusions were infuriating! She'd thought her power had obliterated the uppity zebra mare the second time, only to see the tell-tale magical mist float away instead of a mangled body as the dust settled. Same with the third, and then the fourth, and so on.

"Show yourself!" the empowered mercenary screeched.

"You should try to temper your rage," the smug voice sounded from behind her. "Too much could further advance your age."

"Did you just call me OLD?!" the enraged beyond belief zebra roared before firing more of the exploding bubbles at the mare.

Gilda grit her beak as her armored opponent held his ring weapon in front of him. The interior swirled with darkness and she suddenly felt really weak. Like she was about to fall over. The ground was looking like a better place to take a nap by the moment regardless of the imminent danger her life was in.

Then her partner blasted Khara Saturn's weapon off course and she felt a heck of a lot better. Shaking off how frightening that experience had been, she pounced on the rakshasa, determined that he wasn't getting another shot at her with that thing.

Ring Tercel darted up towards the armored griffon who commanded the storm. He threw a few rings ahead of him and noted with satisfaction that they successfully diverted the path of a lightning bolt that would have struck him otherwise.

"Not bad," Copperbeak Jupiter smirked and flexed his talons, " *for a wind-up toy!* "

As Ring Tercel engaged his opponent in melee, he hoped that his role as distraction would prove enough for Rainbow Dash to do her part. He only had to last long enough.

Pinkie tried to listen to the villainous rant for important information, she really did, but it was just blah, blah, blah, I hate seeing others happy, blah, blah, they all laughed at me, blah, blah, blah, blah, I'm invincible, blah, blah, blah, blah, who's laughing now, blah, blah, blah, blah, *blah* .

"Okay, bored now," she declared, mostly to herself, before her wandering eyes latched onto the tubes connecting the oozy pegasus's helmet and chestplate. "Ooh, this looks important!"

"What? How?" the meanie-mean-ooze-head sputtered in surprise. Honestly, it was like she'd never had someone suddenly and inexplicably appear right next to her. "No, don't!"

Pinkie unceremoniously yanked the tubes out of their connections.

"You fool!" the meanie head yelled at her as her form began to droop. "Those were necessary to keep control of my form! Now I can't keurb blurb blub blub..."

"Whoa..." Pinkie stared in horror at the puddle of ooze and empty armor that used to be her opponent before slinking back over to her froggy partner in a daze. "I... I didn't mean to melt her! I just... she was being mean and scary and talking about destroying all happiness and turning Equestria into Depressedria and can we not tell Twilight that I melted somepony by accident? Please? I didn't mean it and it was an accid–"

She was cut off when her froggy partner abruptly shoved her away from him, causing her to skid across the ground.

"Hey!" she yelled as she got back to her feet. "What was that... for...?"

She stared at the mobile acid-green-in-the-process-of-turning-purple ooze now engulfing her amphibious robo-friend. Had she really been so out of it that she missed her Pinkie Sense?

"Error," Rain Toad sputtered as he was engulfed by the mass, "Emotional processing unit offli–"

The ooze seemed to turn and look at her. It wasn't a nice look.

"Ah-heh..." she chuckled nervously and pulled out one of her party munitions from her mane. "Party petard?"

The ooze blurbled in a way that sounded like laughter and began to form a face. This was why she didn't like this stuff. Most ghosties could be laughed away, the Smooze just laughed right back.

"Smmooooozzee..." the blob groaned and started in her direction.

"Oh fun," Pinkie swore before running as if her ability to enjoy life depended on it.

"Bowbowbow-bowbowbow..." (19)

Guts Stallion grunted as he did his best to hold the armored alicorn back. Behind him, Elec Mare crashed into the ground after being hit with a massive blast of energy. Blasts from Cut Mare and Bomb Stallion didn't even seem to slow him down.

He and the other Light numbers had been recalled and restored to functionality shortly after the docs had devised a cure, though Ice Mare and Fire Mare had been too far away to reach quickly. They'd remained behind to help keep Canterlot running in the midst of this disaster while Rock and his pals took the Cossack numbers to deal with the source. When they'd gotten word of the attack, they'd mobilized against the bastard advancing on Canterlot and were doing their best to buy time for the guard to prepare a response.

He'd prefer they take the lump out on their own, but they were getting their flanks kicked left and right.

Luna swore as she narrowly dodged another blast of dark magic. This foul one-eyed incarnation of the banished tyrant was infuriating! The eye seemed only vulnerable when open and the rest of the body was as harmable as the smoke it appeared made from! And even when it was open, only the mightiest of attacks seemed to deal the beast any harm! At this rate...

"Noble children of Light!" she called to her battle companions. "Thou must go on ahead and destroy the foul source of the curse that plagues Equestria! We shall deal with this beast Sombra has become!"

"Small problem, princess!" noble Rock called back as he evaded the beast's attack.

"There's no exit!" the usually gentle Roll finished for her brother.

Luna charged a spell and blasted away the wall opposite where they entered. "There is now! Make haste and end this plague of darkness while I do battle with this nightmare!"

As the two reluctantly forged ahead, Luna stared down her opponent.

"Now it is merely thee and we," she declared as she readied another spell.

"YYYEEEEESSSSSS..." the Sombra-devil rumbled in vile glee.

Applejack mused that earthbending tended to be a lot more effective when her opponent didn't barrel through boulders like they were wet paper. As it was, she was doing her best just to slow the varmint down and dodge the shrapnel.

Honestly, if it hadn't been for Drill Dog and his pit traps, she didn't think she'd have lasted this long. Her opponent being in a blind rage and ignorant of even obvious traps helped too. Still...

"We're gonna need a plan here soon I reckon!" she yelled to her partner. "We're only slowing this fella down and I don't think we're gettin' reinforcements any time soon!"

"I could do something," Drill Dog yelled back as he wasted a couple more of his bombs on Hammerhoof Uranus's armor, only serving to make the berserk minotaur angrier, "but you'll need to keep him busy by yourself while I get it set up!"

"Done and done!" Applejack yelled back and pulled a lasso out of her subspace pocket. First was to get tall dark and ugly focused solely on her. She whipped the lasso over the thick helmet covering and pulled.

Hammerhoof stopped for a moment and felt the top of his now unarmored head before turning slowly towards Applejack. His eyes began to turn red as the blood vessels swelled and veins in his forehead bulged ominously. The minotaur's nostrils flared and Applejack could have sworn that smoke blasted out of them as he snorted in anger.

"You want it?" she taunted him. "Come an' get it!"

Hammerhoof Uranus bellowed incoherently and charged after the fleeing farm pony.

"And don't let him leave the area!" Drill Dog called to her as he dove underground.

Applejack didn't reply. She was too busy running for her life.

"FORGET THE SALE!" Pluto Rex frothed as his claws tore through everything in reach as he dashed around blindly. "WHEN I'M DONE

WITH YOU NO ONE WILL EVEN BUY YOU AS MEAT!"

He hated the unicorn more than anydog he'd ever met! And her little bulb too!

"AND YOUR TOY WON'T EVEN FETCH A PRICE AS SCRAP METAL!"

Every time his eyes began to clear, that damnable light would flash and blind him again! And the unicorn had sprayed some atrocious scent all over the area that burned his nose! She'd die just for that!

"Oh, such a foul mouth you have!" the unicorn tittered, causing him to turn towards the sound.

"BE BROKEN AND DIE!" he screamed as he charged the source of the sound with all the enhanced speed he could muster.

It was too bad he couldn't see the high tensile strength thread strung across his path.

Twilight nursed a chemical burn on her shoulder as Dive Serpent's missiles intercepted another blast of the corrosive liquid from the not-as-dead-as-he-should-be seapony pirate.

Why wasn't she dead yet?

That fact was bugging her more than even the burn or the fight. These were supposed to be alicorn level opponents. She may still be on the high end for her baseline non-alicorn self despite the power dampening, but she still shouldn't have been able to mount as effective a defense as she had.

Her shields actually held under the power of this member of the Star Druids when Luna's had been cut through like they weren't there. Her only injuries had come from the splashing of missed shots. Dive Serpent's missiles were actually keeping up with Blackmane's water

blasts, rendering them much less dangerous, and allowing him to remain mostly undissolved. Plus their opponent seemed more frustrated and less smug than she'd been expecting.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she raised another shield, which held quite firmly. It was like the water was solely chemical after being manifested, and unable to corrode magical force like it did her companion's armor.

Honestly, even accounting for possible overconfidence, she and her partner shouldn't be doing nearly as well as they were. After all, Ahuizotl had...

Ahuizotl had played them for chumps.

Twilight wanted to slap herself when she realized what was going on. Their opponents were powerful, sure, but they weren't necessarily alicorn tier. At least not in all respects. They were focused. Specialized. Ahuizotl's laser power allowed him to pierce barriers, even alicorn ones, which made him the perfect choice to catch an unaware defender off guard and kill whatever was left of Equestrian morale. They were supposed to believe the Star Druids were all alicorn-level opponents and that resistance was hopeless.

But as his original duel with the Lights showed, and they'd failed to pick up on, his other enhancements fell a bit short. He was strong, no question, but he wasn't as strong as he wanted them to believe.

After that realization, the rest fell into place. Blackmane's water weapon didn't corrode her shields because it wasn't magic at all. It could only corrode physical substances. And if it wasn't a magical liquid...

Well, she'd never beaten an opponent with a 'purify water' spell before. But in the Loops, there really was a first time for everything.

'Damn,' Blues swore internally as he gave the room he and Daring had ended up in a cursory scan. *'Dead end.'*

He was about to backtrack and find a different way when he noticed Daring staring at some of the ancient writing that circled the chamber.

"Blues," the pegasus explorer's breath hitched, "do you know what this *says* ?"

"Ancient languages aren't exactly my specialty," he reminded her.

"It says here that Le Tor wasn't the enemy of the Magi," Daring turned to him with wide eyes. "He–"

"Was its leader," finished the voice of Ahuizotl from the room's entrance right before it slammed shut.

"Alright, get those canisters ready!" Shining Armor commanded what little of the guard force was currently battle ready. "Let's see how this 'Le Tor' likes knockout gas!"

"Belay that!" the frantic voice of Dr. Light intruded into the preparations while the older stallion waved around some device that he seemed to think was important.

"Why should we?" Shining glared at the doctor. Brilliant or not, the stallion was not in command and his nerves were frayed enough as it was without having his judgement called into question without sound reason.

"Because your foe is not an alicorn!" Dr. Light panted. "He's not even alive!"

That sounded like a sound reason. "Explain."

"These readings here," Dr. Light thrust the device into Shining's face, "show that under the armor is nothing but metal, wires, and electronics! The armor may be the genuine article, but what lies inside it is not!"

'Sweet mother of Celestia damn it!' Shining cursed mentally and rubbed his face with his hoof. There went his entire battle plan. "What now?"

"These readings here," Dr. Light pointed to something that to Shining could have been written in Bushwoolie for all he understood it, "show that the thaumic core is powered by the same Nightmare Force that shrouds Equestria! If we can just douse it with the cure, we may be able to render it inert!"

"How much do we have right now?" Shining asked.

"Enough for one good attempt since I doubt he'll go willingly," Dr. Light admitted. "With Rain Toad on the mission, Dr. Cossack and Nyx won't have another batch ready for hours."

"It'll have to do," Shining admitted. "Okay everyone! Listen up! Change of plans!"

None of them noticed a filly eavesdropper sneak away.

'ANALYZING SUBSTANCE...'

Zecora resisted the urge to smirk as her opponent's jaw dropped when she was revealed unharmed behind a shimmering skull-shaped barrier.

"Closing your mouth would be wise," she stated, "unless you care to capture flies."

"Impossible..." the traitorous mercenary growled. "You should be a smear! No barrier is strong enough to defend against my power!"

"Of course it is," a new voice interjected as a third zebra, the robotic Skull Mane, entered the clearing. "Provided you know how to modulate it properly. And since you're so free with demonstrating your power on phantoms, it gave me ample time to study and adapt."

"I'll give you a demonstration!" Zuri yelled and flung more of the exploding bubbles at them both. Like the ones before, they detonating harmlessly on Skull Mane's shields as Zecora walked calmly forward.

"Good night," she said when she was practically nose to nose with the mercenary, right before blowing a powder in her face. "Sleep tight."

The mercenary was unconscious before she hit the ground.

Fluttershy was no stranger to being shot at, nor was she a stranger to life or death battles. She'd raised Lehman Russ after all. Still, trying to fight anything that outmassed and outgunned you tended to involve a lot of running. And with the power she'd amassed over the Loops taking a hit, she was *very* outgunned at the moment.

Still, she'd managed to make a good showing right up until she tripped over an exposed root. And with a murderous dragon bearing down and her druidic magic still on the fritz, things weren't exactly looking up.

"You leave Miss Fluttershy alone you great brute!" the voice of her robot partner yelled as he jumped in front of her and began sucking in air and debris for all he was worth. The mechanical lapine obviously meant well, but the strength of his vacuum was, well, laughable next to the immense war machine that was the armed and armored dragon Inti Mars.

"You cannot be serious..." said dragon blinked as he tried to process the action. "You are a glorified vacuum cleaner! I am a *god of war* !"

The main cannon on his head took aim at the two as Dust Bunny stared defiantly back. The robot's suction died down and Fluttershy saw something working its way back up her companion's only weapon.

"You are *nothing* before my might!" Inti bellowed as he prepared to fire.

Dust Bunny was faster. The compressed ball of debris fired back out his head-mounted vacuum and right down the barrel mounted on Inti Mars's head. The munitions about to fire at them both detonated in the barrel and the dragon roared in pain.

But he did not fall.

"FOR THAT YOU DIE FIRST!" the dragon roared and prepared to crush the robot.

Even after countless Loops, Fluttershy still had issues defending herself from those who were hostile towards her. She could, of course, but it wasn't her first instinct. Protecting others though? That was second nature to her.

Suddenly her opponent was looking much more her size as she roared her own challenge back and slammed her yellow-scaled claws into his torso. Flicking her flowing pink hair out of her face, the now draconic Fluttershy focused on rending the one who would hurt her friend in two. (20)

Twilight spat water out of her mouth as she finished helping Dive Serpent haul their defeated opponent out of the river. As predicted, with his corrosive weapon turned to pure water, he was essentially harmless. Tough, sure, but offensively not much of an issue.

At least not with a larger combatant on her side who had ranged weapons.

"Huh," she blinked as she realized the 'body' in the armor was now nothing more than a clay statue. "I'd heard about these things, but I'd never seen them. (21) I thought they were all destroyed. Well, Rock and Roll just need a piece to copy the enchantment so let's take the gauntlets and go find the others."

Ring Tercel grunted as his opponent jolted him with electricity again.

"How do you still live?" Copperbeak Jupiter snarled in frustration.

"Oh, come now," the national guard robot snorted as he threw several of his rings at his opponent. "I was made for aerial combat. Of *course* I'm insulated!" *'Though not enough to take too many more of those. Any time now Rainbow Dash...'*

Rarity dusted herself off as she finished stripping her opponent of his enchanted armor and tying him up with some of her special threads.

"Honestly," she sniffed, "this regalia is *far* too fabulous for a ruffian like you. Oh, Bright Mane...!"

"Y-yes ma'am?" the timid robot replied from where he was standing a fair distance away. Honestly, she didn't see what he had to be afraid of.

"Do be a dear and carry this for me, would you?" Rarity fluttered her eyelashes. "We simply *must* be on our way."

"Er..." the robot hesitated in confusion, not understanding the tone. "Of course."

"Ah-ah-ah!" Ahuizotl Terra tsked as Blues pointed his hoof cannon at him and pointed his hand-tail laser weapon right back. "I wouldn't do that if I were you..."

"I've seen your weapon in action," Blues returned confidently. "I can handle it."

"Perhaps," Daring's old foe allowed before turning to point the weapon at the archaeologist, "but can she?"

Blues continued glaring, but lowered his weapon.

"What's your game Ahuizotl?" Daring asked defiantly.

"Just taking what's rightfully mine," the creature explained. "What's always been rightfully mine according to these writings."

"Explain," Daring demanded.

"Everything you Equestrians have ever heard about the Magi is wrong," their opponent declared smugly. "They were not the enemies of Le Tor, they were his most loyal followers. Members of every race dedicated to seeking out knowledge and power and using it to rule the world. This armor I wear? It's no coincidence it fits me so well. It belonged to my ancestor, Le Tor's second in command with the title of 'Terra'. They were the best of friends and the most loyal of allies, developing the artifact of Le Mu together to control the sun and stars. At least until the unicorn members decided they were done sharing mystical knowledge with the other races and turned on the rest of the order."

"You can't possibly be claiming–"

"Oh, but I *can* ," Ahuizotl Terra grinned fiercely. "All the names you know us by are merely labels used to keep the truth to ourselves, and no longer necessary. We are the new Magi, and the rightful rulers of all the world."

And without warning, he lunged at them both.

'ANALYSIS COMPLETE...'

'OPTIMAL SOLVENT DETERMINED...'

'SYNTHESIZING SOLVENT...'

Rainbow was currently having to reevaluate her plan. Going above the storm to try and dissipate it with a Sonic Rainboom had taken her too close to the main shroud of darkness and the proximity had made her light-headed.

Right now, she was lining herself up for Plan B. Because she'd only get one shot at it.

It was a lot like Plan A, just with a different target.

Rock and Roll surprisingly managed to make it to the artifact chamber without incident. It took them a few moments to fully realize that, yes, there really were no more defenses or obstacles between them and the current version of Ra Moon.

The only thing that bothered them as they stepped inside was that they had yet to hear from Dr. Wily.

But as they entered, there seemed to be no sign of him, or of any surprises. Even the artifact, the familiar giant obsidian orb ringed with intricate designs and emblazoned with a red eye design, looked completely undefended. The two mechanical heroes traded looks and shrugged before taking aim at the artifact of Le Mu.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the voice of their recurring foe interrupted. Strangely, it came as a bit of a relief. Known Dr. Wily quantities were almost always preferable to unknown ones.

"Why not?" Roll asked politely.

"Because if you don't..." Wily's voice declared as a large monitor on the other side of the room lit up showing a familiar scene.

It was a video feed of Canterlot. From the eyes of an attacker.

"...well, I'm afraid Ra Th–*ahem* Le Tor will stop playing nice."

All she knew was rage. This insolent hatchling had dared to harm her precious treasure and now he would pay. With blood and pain and–

"–iss Fluttershy stop!" a voice snapped her out of the red haze. "Our foe is defeated! You don't have to do any more!"

She paused and looked at the other dragon beneath her. He failed to move or retaliate. Was he dead? Did it matter? Why did her head hurt so much?

"You must change back Miss Fluttershy!"

Right, she was supposed to be a pony, not a dragon. As if the thought was the trigger, she began to shrink back to her normal form.

"Oh!" she gasped as her head cleared. "Yes, that's much better. What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Dust Bunny replied. "I'd imagine that your transformation into a dragon changed how the curse affected you even with the treatment in place, but without further information I can't be sure."

"Is he...?"

"He'll live."

"Oh, good. I couldn't bear it if... We should find the others now."

"Of course Miss Fluttershy."

The guards waited until the right moment as the mechanical alicorn strode calmly towards the palace. When it was in the spot, they all sprung out and flung the anti-dark magic potion at the robot.

Only to watch it slide off a magic barrier, never reaching the target.

'Any time now,' Applejack thought furiously as the super-strong minotaur drew ever closer.

"Done!" Drill Dog popped up nearby.

"Ain't nothin' happenin'!" Applejack yelled back.

"It just needs a trigger!" the robot caninoid replied. "The ground is as porous as a sponge now! Anything will collapse it!"

"You want me ta bury him?!" Applejack dodged another swipe.

"You got a better idea?"

Well, no, she actually didn't. She pushed her earthbending into the ground hastily and jumped for all she was worth.

The ground caved under her like it was hit with a meteor and Hammerhoof Uranus bellowed in confusion as he was buried in rock and dirt.

"He gonna live?" Applejack asked worriedly.

"I was more concerned with *you* living to be honest." her companion answered.

Applejack thought that over for a moment. "Fair 'nuff."

Jupiter, formerly known as Copperbeak, scowled as his foe's eyes widened and he disengaged hastily. As if anyone would fall for that old tr–

His world exploded in pain and light as something slammed into his back.

As the sky exploded in rainbow light, Pinkie chanced a look behind her.

The Smooze looked like it had gotten bigger again.

She ran faster.

'SOLVENT SYNTHESIZED...'

'ARMING...'

"YYOOUUU TOOOOOKK MMYYY CRRYYYSSTAAALLLSS..." the Sombra-devil accused. He was getting more coherent by the moment. Luna needed to end this fast.

"They were never thine to begin with," she retorted as she began charging a spell more powerful than she'd used in a long time.

"MY CRRYYYSSTAALLLLL EEMMMPIIIRRREEE..." Sombra fired bolts of dark magic that Luna narrowly avoided.

Luna's horn glowed brighter with raw magic. Almost...

"YYOOUUU TOOOK MMYYY MMIIINNNDD... MMYYY BOODDYYYY... MMYYY CRRYYSSTAALLL SSLLAAAVVESSS... NNOOOOWW II SHHAALLLLL TAAAKKEE YYOOUUURR–"

Whatever threat the foul creature would have made was cut off when her bolt of power lanced through his single foul eye and shredded

the runes maintaining his presence in this place.

"There you are!" Twilight greeted Rainbow as she and Ring Tercel flew down with an unconscious Copperbeak Jupiter held between them. "What happened to him?"

"Sonic Rainboom to the back," Ring Tercel explained. "It appears Miss Dash broke his spine. He'll live, thanks to his armor, but it is uncertain if he'll ever walk again."

"I was expecting him to dodge and be knocked out by the shockwave!" Rainbow insisted. "Not take a direct hit!"

She was prevented from reassuring Dash that it was alright, she'd probably have to arrange counseling after they got back to Ponyville, when the rest began showing up. First Rarity and Bright Mane with Pluto Rex's regalia in tow, then Zecora and Skull Mane with both a restrained Zuri and her own armor, Applejack and Drill Dog with Hammerhoof Uranus's helmet, and finally Dust Bunny and Fluttershy. The latter who had apparently beaten Inti Mars to a bloody pulp. All that was left was to find Pinkie and Rain Toad and then go meet up with Gilda and Pharaoh Sphinx and see if the strike teams needed reinforcing.

Before she could even suggest searching for her, Pinkie burst into the clearing like the terror of a thousand Loops was after her.

Then the Smooze broke through the treeline and Twilight admitted that wasn't far off.

'ARMED...'

'RAIN FLUSH: FIRE'

Before anyone could react, a rocket broke through the Smooze's body and rocketed into the clouds above and burst. For a few long seconds nothing else happened. Even the Smooze's attention was on the sky, apparently puzzling out what had just happened.

Then the first drops of rain fell, increasing to a downpour in moments. The Smooze writhed as if in pain as the rain pummeled it mercilissly and it began to dissolve and thin. More and more the Smooze melted into harmless liquid the soil drank greedily until the group could make out a form contained within. As the Smooze melted off of it, Rain Toad stood and stretched.

"Emotional Processing error corrected," the robot monotoned. "Reinitializing... Damnit Pinkie, pay attention next time!"

Pinkie stared at the restored robot and sniffled. And then began to tear up. And then she tackled the robo-amphibian in a hug.

"I'm sorry!" the party pony bawled her eyes out. "It was an accident! I didn't mean to melt her into a gooey eldritch abomination and get you eaten!"

Apparently Rainbow wasn't the only one who might need therapy.

Blues grit his teeth as he struggled against Ahuizotl's grip. He'd barely managed to deflect one shot of the faux Spark Chaser weapon with his shield (the thing really was just about indestructible) and he needed to disable it before Daring's old foe got bored and decided to stop toying with them.

It might help if Daring would stop staring at whatever new glyph she found so interesting on the damn wall after being thrown into it.

The armor Ahuizotl had was very energy resistant, so Blues switched to the Dust Crusher and fired at the laser gauntlet.

"Gah!" Ahuizotl cried out as the offensive piece of his armor sparked wildly. "You'll pay for that you little..."

"Ahuizotl, stop!" Daring warned suddenly.

Rock and Roll watched impotently as the view of Le Tor's video feed approached the Canterlot gates and a bedraggled looking Celestia limped out to meet it.

"What... do... you... want...?" Celestia gasped out.

"Oh, nothing much, princess," Dr. Wily's voice sounded from both ends of the feed. "Just your immediate and unconditional surrender."

"Never!" a young voice yelled defiantly as the dark form of the robot alicorn filly Nyx interposed itself between Dr. Wily's creation and the ruler of Equestria.

"Took you all long enough," Gilda greeted the group as they approached the ruins, sitting atop a bound, gagged, and de-armored Khara.

"Gilda?" Rainbow blurted out at the sight of her friend. The griffon was covered in cuts and bruises, plus she was missing fur and feathers in several places. "You look terrible." (22)

"So about the same as you then?" the griffon smirked playfully.

"Sounds like they've got everything in hoof Scoots."

"Well, yeah, but you know how these things go. Plan A never *works."*

"And just what do you expect me to do?"

"You run on that Nightmare Force stuff too, right? Couldn't ya just, I dunno, take it back or somethin'?"

"I don't think it works like that Applebloom."

"Actually DT... It just might..."

Magic retrieval was a skill that saw little use among the magically adept. For one, you couldn't 'retrieve' somepony else's magic that way, just your own. For another, it was a pretty darn sloppy way to undo spells and sometimes had unforeseen consequences. And finally, if you took too much back at once, you could give yourself a really bad headache.

The first one could be circumvented in this specific scenario only because Nyx was a robot that ran on the same wavelength of dark magic as the attacker. The second was a non issue right now because, whatever happened, it could only improve the current situation. The third was the tricky one. Nyx couldn't take in the whole curse because she just couldn't store that much. But the power driving a single robot?

That she could do.

Concentrating, Nyx connected easily with the dark magic powering the robo-alicorn before her and *pulled* .

"What are you doing you insolent whelp?!" Wily's voice protested from the robot. "I demand you stop this at o–"

The robot's eyes dimmed as the last of its power was removed and it collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe it was 'professional courtesy'. Perhaps it was the fact that he'd never heard quite that tone of seriousness in her voice. Whatever it was, Ahuizotl *did* stop.

"And why should I do that Miss Do?"

"Because of what this passage says!" Daring pointed insistently at the section of the wall next to her.

"Oh, that?" Ahuizotl rolled his eyes. "That just tells how the artifact of Le Mu was used to imprison the sun and stars. Much like it's doing now. A little vandalized perhaps, but what old ruin isn't?"

"Are you ever going to learn to read these things properly?" Daring snarled at her foe and pointed to a particularly complex glyph with a crude line carved through it. "This doesn't mean the *actual* sun and stars! Written like this, an accurate translation is 'one who is as important as the sun and stars', or the ancient symbol for a *ruler* . The line through it isn't vandalism, though scholars say the practice may have begun that way. It means that the individual being referenced was *despised* . A tyrant in this case."

"Are..." Blues blinked, Ahuizotl Terra mirroring the action, "are you saying that the artifact is an actual prison?"

"Yes!" Daring confirmed. "A 'prison of darkness to hold light most foul'. And if I'm reading this right... Whoever it is is still in there. And alive."

Blues took a moment to process that before reaching the same conclusion Daring had.

"We have to stop my brother and sister from destroying it!"

When the video feed went down and Wily began cursing and railing about it, Rock and Roll charged their Mega Busters and took aim at the artifact of Le Mu.

"NO!" Dr. Wily yelled when he noticed them. "STOP! DO–"

The two charged shots tore through the artifact, causing it to explode and dust to fill the room. In the center of the dust cloud, where the artifact used to be, an orange glow pulsed to life.

"Oh, no..." Wily moaned in dismay. "What have you two done...?"

The pulse grew stronger and seemed to stand. As the dust cleared, the Light twins and Dr. Wily could see a figure begin to take shape.

The hooves came into view first. Clad in royal blue armor and more massive than any known pony's. As more was revealed, it became clear that the equine body was larger than even Celestia's, with a masculine bulk that would have put Big Mac to shame, and covered in the same armor. And then the head started to come into view, only it wasn't a head. It was a second torso. Covered in the same armor as the rest of the body, this second torso was revealed to have ape-like arms and hands attached.

The figure was a centaur.

Then the real head was revealed. The helmet covered the entire face save the eyes, which blazed with light, and atop the head were a pair of massive wicked-looking horns. Like a demon. The icon of the sun was attached firmly to the forehead.

"Aaahhh," the figure stretched in its newfound freedom. **"After ten thousand years, I am free."**

Rock and Roll did their best to keep calm at this new development, but it was hard.

"It is time for the world to recognize the unforgiving light of it's true master."

In the back, Dr. Wily tried his best to sneak silently away.

"It is time for all to bow before Tirek Sunstar."

Right as they agreed on a plan of action to back up the strike teams, Twilight and the others felt the spark as their Elements began to

regain power and the dark curse began to recede. The fading red and orange of sunset became visible as the sky cleared.

"All right!" Dash cheered. "They did it!"

"Gracious, but that was quite an adventure," Rarity fanned herself dramatically.

"So I guess Rock and his sister won't be needing these armor bits anymore?" Pinkie questioned as she idly spun the helmet from Desert Mercury on her hoof.

"When did you...?" Rain Toad looked at the pink earth pony strangely.

"Oh, I went back and got it during one of those moments nopony was watching of course!" Pinkie grinned.

"Best not to think about it, sugarcube," Applejack advised sagely.

"Well, the Elements are regaining strength and the curse is lifted," Twilight smiled. "I'd say this has been a good day's wo–"

Twilight was cut off when, right as the last rays of sunlight vanished over the horizon, a new sun seemed to explode out the top of the temple before them.

(A little earlier)

"Mega Mane! Mega Mare!" Blues yelled for his siblings as he, Daring, and Ahuizotl tore down the hall towards the innermost chamber where the artifact of Le Mu rested. While their ultimate goals were different, even Ahuizotl had agreed to a truce to stop whoever was imprisoned in the artifact from being released. "Don't–"

All three skidded to a halt at the sight in the chamber. The artifact lay shattered and standing in the rubble was a massive armored

centaur. The royal blues of the armor contrasted with the bright sun-like flames that licked out of every seam and the heat that rolled off of him was more unbearable than the hottest summer.

"Ah, more supplicants to bow before the world's rightful ruler and his most holy of light," the centaur mused at them.

"How do you know our language?" Daring stared wide-eyed. "The words of our eras should be incomprehensible to the other!"

"Your ignorance will be permitted this once," the centaur stared back. **"For how could you in your imperfections know of the gift of tongues that I in my holy righteousness possess? It matters not. Come and swear your lives to me so we may purge the rest of the world of its taint."**

"No," the twin voices of Rock and Roll cut the tableau. The centaur turned slowly towards them, as if incapable of comprehending the word.

"And who are you to dare speak this way to I, Tirek Sunstar, the true ruler of this world and embodiment of all light?"

"Rock, known as the Mega Mane, son of Light," Rock stood his ground defiantly.

"Roll, known as the Mega Mare, daughter of Light," Roll answered with just as much steel in her voice as her brother.

"A son and daughter of light?" Tirek Sunstar's voice gave the impression of blinking. **"Then you of all beings should support my holy cause to purge the dark taint that infects the world with my holy fire."**

"No, because we know what results from that kind of talk," Rock returned.

"Needless pain and suffering, heaped the most on those that deserve it least," Roll agreed.

"Death of any who would dare to consider ideas counter to your own," Daring added.

"Even should they be right," Blues finished.

"And you?" Tirek turned to look at the last member of the group staring him down.

"I am Ahuizotl Terra," Daring's continual foe declared himself. "Heir to the Magi and the real inheritor of the world's rulership! I will not allow some millenia-old thief to steal that from me!"

Tirek stared at him before beginning to chuckle, which deepened into a booming laugh that shook the walls even as the light and heat pouring from his form pulsed in time with his mirth. **"The pitiful misshapen heir to the treasonous Magi dares to claim *me* a thief?! How amusing and appropriate with the way your companions spout the same ignorant tripe that arrogant gathering of fools did! Very well! We shall end this the same way as before! With righteous holy battle!"**

And with that, Tirek Sunstar rose into the air and rocketed through the ceiling.

"Interesting," a voice from the sun-bright being spoke as the night sky around them lit up like daytime. **"It would appear these new Magi have prepared an ambush for my holy return. Clever of you. Cowardly, for which you must be cleansed in righteous flame, but clever."**

"Thou speakest of things thou know not heartless miscreant!" a new voice interposed itself as Luna teleported in between the new being and the group below. **"We sensed your foul presence and have arrived to protect our little ponies from your wrath! No**

harm shall befall them while their princess of the night draws breath!"

"A follower of darkness?" the being mused as his light dimmed just enough for those below to make out the armored form of a centaur.

'Holy roots and leaves...' Twilight's eyes widened. *'It that Tirek?!'*

"Your taint shall be the first to be cleansed."

"We shall see villain!" Luna yelled as she unleashed a massive blast of magic from her horn. The centaur was hit directly, not even bothering to move or even block it seemed. But then, he'd only let out a grunt when struck and hadn't even been pushed back all that much. Luna, however, had followed up the blast by charging the figure right behind it. Twilight could feel the way Luna was using her earth pony magic to enhance her strength for the physical blow all the way from where she stood without even trying.

Luna struck true and the centaur's armored head snapped back from the blow and there was a scream of pain.

Luna's scream.

The alicorn of the moon plummeted back in their direction, holding the hoof that she'd used to strike her opponent to her and hit the ground hard. She skidded to a halt a short distance away and Twilight got a good look at the hoof. Or rather, the charred stump where it used to be. She could even see the fine charcoal powder marring Luna's coat and realized what had happened.

You're telling me that this fortress somehow managed to charcoalize an alicorn's hoof?

'Great exfoliation,' Twilight thought in horror, *'he's a living sun!'*

"Twi?" Applejack looked at her friend.

"Elements, girls," Twilight replied, summoning hers. The time for playing around was officially over.

Five more flashes of light heralded her friends, Awake and not, summoning their own Elements. The six glowed with magical power and the Rainbow of Light burst forth and shot towards the glowing centaur above...

...and shattered into multi-colored motes of magic that swiftly faded.

"...What just...?" Twilight stared at the shining form of Tirek with his fist extended after a contemptuous backhand.

"Fools," he spat. **"You seek to use light magic against me? The embodiment of all that is Holy and Just?"**

"And where do you think you're going?" Blues asked as he grabbed Dr. Wily trying to sneak away.

"I'm trying to get to my contingency plan so I can fix this mess *you* created!" the mad scientist fumed.

"Fix Ahuizotl's weapon first," Blues ordered as his brother and sister jumped up the opening Tirek Sunstar had made when he left. "We're going to need all the help we can get."

Twilight was currently having an internal argument with herself.

'The Elements didn't work...'

'Brilliant observation, me, but this isn't the time.'

'Why didn't the Elements work?'

'No clue. Can I perhaps try to think of something else that would?'

'The Elements always work!'

'Not this time they didn't. Look, can I stop–'

'I mean, unless one of the six aren't in harmony with the others, but we all were, so it should have worked and–'

'CAN I STOP FOCUSING ON THAT AND THINK OF A PLAN B NOW?!'

'Like what? Going alicorn? Worked out real well for Luna, didn't it?'

'I can cast spells to protect myself and the rest of us from harm, duh.'

'Oh, sure, and then he starts taking all of us seriously.'

'Yeah, and I've got power to spare. I've been in Dragonball Loops and kicked flank before, remember?'

'Yeah, but the odds of taking out someone as powerful as he is quickly aren't promising, meaning I'd get into a full knock-down-drag-out and how long would Equestria last under that kind of fight?'

'Huh?'

'I said it myself, I've been to Dragonball Loops before. Surely *I remember what happens there when two uber-powerful fighters square off. Especially when one cares nothing for collateral damage. So, again, I ask myself: How long would Equestria last under that kind of fight?'*

'Er... I... Uh... ARGH! I HATE IT WHEN I'M RIGHT ABOUT THESE THINGS!'

Rock and Roll exited the top of the ruins, busters blazing. Tirek Sunstar didn't even seem to notice. At least at first.

"Pathetic," he scowled and formed an orb of solar flame in one hand larger than either of them. **"And to think you claimed to be children of light."**

The blast didn't hit them. However, the shockwave from when it hit the temple and exploded threw them off their feet and sent them tumbling down the outer walls. After several seconds of seeming to hit every ledge and decorative carving, they landed near the group of their friends and allies.

"You are not worthy of such a claim," the voice of Tirek Sunstar called after them.

"Hey there," Rock smiled at the others weakly. "You having as much fun as we are?"

"Probably," Pinkie chirped. "Because I'm not having any fun right now and that didn't look fun at all."

"You are weak and insolent," the armored centaur continued, seemingly so confident in his power that he saw no need to follow up his attack.

"We brought you a few things," Rarity told them as she set the bundle of Pluto Rex's armor before them. It was followed by pieces of armor from Desert Mercury, Khara Saturn, Zuri Venus, Hammerhoof Uranus, Copperbeak Jupiter, and Blackmane Neptune.

"Sorry," Fluttershy apologized from where she was trying fruitlessly to see to Luna's injury. "Inti Mars's was a little big to carry."

"Defiant of your betters," Tirek continued, uncaring for the tableau below him.

"No worries," Roll told her as she and her brother proceeded to scan the enchantments on each armor for their variable weapons systems as quickly as possible. "I tagged him as I ran past. Rock got Hammerhoof's as well."

"Just like my ungrateful son, Le Tor."

"Wait, *what* ?" Daring and Twilight whipped their heads around to stare at Tirek.

"Blast!" Dr. Wily swore as he tried to fix Ahuizotl's weapon. "What did you *do* Break Mane?!"

"I defended myself," Blues retorted curtly. "Now hurry up. Tirek Sunstar deciding to monologue his history is giving us some time, but that's not going to last."

"So, you have heard of the ungrateful spawn," Tirek Sunstar rumbled.

"Well, yeah, but his parentage is lost to history!" Twilight replied, her nature for seeking knowledge driving her mouth. "All we know about him is that he imprisoned the sun! Which, come to think of it is probably you, so..."

"I see..." Tirek's sneer was audible. **"This is the thanks I get for my life of Holy service? This is all my years of firm and Just leadership is worth? This is what the vanquisher of the mad Queen Majesty is granted? Forgotten and erased? Intolerable. The taint has spread its roots deeper than I imagined."**

"But..." Daring's eyes were wide. "Queen Majesty is a myth!"

"Oh, the mad queen was quite real," Tirek told them. **"As was her vile and unholy power to wish for anything, including the enslavement of the hearts and minds of all under her domain, save those she thought 'unworthy' of her 'protection', instead wishing for them to be the monsters she saw them as. How all the races cheered when I slew her at last, their minds finally their own. And how naive I was to allow her misbegotten spawn to live afterwards. How foolish I was to raise him as my own."**

Twilight began to feel ill. She'd had one run-in with a version of Queen Majesty and this one sounded even worse than that one. How bad did someone need to be until Tirek of all beings was seen as a hero by comparison?

"Le Tor had not the madness of his dam, may the heavens be praised for such small favors," Tirek continued, **"but he had ideas unworthy of his position. All under the sun have their place, and to step outside it is unthinkable and a perversion of all that is Just. But he insisted on the misguided notion that all, even the lowest of the low, deserved enlightenment. As if higher callings were meant for any but those chosen to rule. To grant such to those unworthy to possess it is the greatest folly of all, and I forbade him to do so. But the one I called my son, even after I shed my weak form of flesh to better enable my holy crusade, could not find it in himself to be obedient. And so, behind my back and against the will of the heavens, he formed the treasonous Magi."**

As he spoke, Ahuizotl clad in his repaired Terra armor exited the temple, followed by Blues and both turned to face the blazing figure above.

"He welcomed all into his fold," Tirek turned to Daring's recurring foe. **"Including the most unworthy of misshapen demons like your ancestor. Truly, I regret that my efforts to erase your despicable kind were not more successful."**

Ahuizotl's face showed shock, and then rage. For the first time Daring Do could remember, her nemesis forewent gloating or taunting and simply attacked, the laser weapon of his Magi armor lancing through the armored centaur again and again.

Tirek Sunstar remained unmoved.

"Very well," he spoke, even as Ahuizotl fired again. **"If battle is the end you crave, then you shall have it!"**

The group of robots, ponies, zebra, and griffon hadn't been idle. While some listened to Tirek Sunstar's monologue, others had been arranging a plan of battle. Bright Mane had begun with the revelation that even though he appeared unharmed, Tirek was taking damage from the attacks.

"It's hard to see because of the light he puts off," the light-generating robot had said, "but each impact is leaving a mark."

"Yon Bright Mane speaks true," Luna had gasped as she got to her remaining hooves, her horn glowing with some spell. "The villain's armor hast an ancient and seemingly incomplete form of protective enchantment on it. Almost all force from any assault is sent to his immortal body of flame, leaving the armor to take what little is left. All strikes, no matter how mighty, deal his armor the same manner of harm. But the armor also seems to sustain his form. If it is lost, then his body wouldst be lost in kind."

"Then we use the 'Death of a Thousand Cuts'," Daring nodded firmly as Dash finished strapping Copperbeak Jupiter's gauntlets to her forehooves as best she could and Applejack strapped Hammerhoof Uranus's helmet to her head.

"Heh," Gilda smirked, gripping the ring she'd kept from Khara Saturn. "So we're using the griffon way to end this. Traditional, no less."

"The ancient griffons would pardon any crime if only the perpetrator could survive one thousand cuts from the wronged parties," Ring Tercel explained quickly as the rest of the Cossack numbers finished preparations.

"Darling," Rarity rolled her eyes as she finished hastily adjusting Pluto Rex's regalia to her form. It wasn't her best work, but it would just have to do. "I *don't* think we're going to be keeping count." (23)

"I certainly hope not," Drill Dog snarled.

"Everyone know the plan?" Rock checked quickly, getting a chorus of nods. "Then break!"

Dr. Wily grumbled as he furiously finished adjustments to his contingency plan and began the siphoning of remaining Nightmare Force into its power core.

"Heh..." he chuckled. "The ancient Magi were geniuses for their time, but only *I* could have perfected their arts into this ultimate creation! When the activation sequence is complete, even this 'Tirek Sunstar' will not stand before its power!"

Fluttershy regretted that there didn't seem to be any way to deal with Tirek Sunstar without involving death, but she knew that often times that was the way of life. Sometimes things must perish so that others can live. It was the way of nature, and over the Loops she'd become ever more in touch with the cycles of nature and life through her druidic practices and made it her way as well.

Right now, she was doing her best to support the others in their efforts. Some nature charms to boost the protective efforts of the others as they unleashed everything they could upon the genocidal centaur above them.

Twilight and Luna had both warded everyone as best they could, but even so they were all trying their best not to get hit. On the offense, the purple unicorn and the princess of the night were foregoing their normal magical prowess to simply unleash raw magical bolts upon their common foe; Rarity dashed around with incredible speed from the 'borrowed' regalia she wore, sniping her solar foe from every angle; Applejack used her earth-bending and the strength boost from her pilfered helmet to heave rocks and stones upwards; Pinkie was using her pink lantern ring, though its power seemed weakened from its wielder's loss of good mood; Rainbow Dash was using the gauntlets she'd acquired to summon intermittent bolts of lightning; Gilda stood off to the side, aiming the draining effect of the ring she'd

won from her opponent at Tirek, even if it seemed to do little; Zecora was mixing her potions with the exploding bubbles her own acquired armor produced to decent effect; Cossack's robots leveled support fire from every angle they could along with the Lights; Daring Do had accepted the gauntlets of Blackmane Neptune from Twilight, allowing her to occasionally manifest a ball of water that she shot at the centaur above; and Ahuizotl kept shooting Tirek in rage.

This had been going on for minutes and, in retrospect, it couldn't have lasted.

"Your valor is commendable, even if your allegiance is not," Tirek Sunstar spoke up suddenly. **"But I tire of this distraction."**

There was little warning. None of the gestures he'd been using to telegraph his blast up until now. He simply pointed his hand at Ahuizotl and unleashed a gigantic beam of light.

Ahuizotl was already trying to dodge, and he half managed it. But that still left the other half blasted by a beam of heat that turned the ground below into molten stone. It was only the combined protections of his armor and the wardings of Twilight and Luna, backed by Fluttershy's druidic magic, that saved his life. But even then the stench of burning flesh reached them all as Ahuizotl frantically ripped off his orange-hot armor amidst pained howls.

'This guy could land in a Dragonball Loop and no one there would think him out of place,' Twilight thought numbly. That blast had burned through her wards, Luna's, and the forgotten magic of an ancient order enhanced by mad magical science and *still* nearly killed Ahuizotl.

'I know Rock says he knows how to handle this Sunstar guy Tirek's fused with in his home Loop, but if he tries to unleash another one of those, I'm going alicorn, consequences be damn–'

"ARRGGHHH!" Tirek's pained cry cut off her thoughts as a massive blast of dark magic ripped into him.

'Or I could let the obvious deus ex machina do it for me,' she admitted as the newest combatant climbed out of the hole in the temple. It was a massive black devil-series robot with glowing runes on its body, and the eye had apparently been designed as a one-pony cockpit containing none other than Dr. Wily.

"BWA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!" The mad scientist's voice boomed out from the machine as an armored covering slid over the cockpit. **"Yes! Fall before the power of my ultimate Wily Machine: Le Devil!"**

Rain Toad had been mostly using his ability to produce water to put out the numerous fires Tirek Sunstar had been making. Thus he was the first on the scene to douse the burned Ahuizotl and his red-hot armor before further damage was done.

The second on the scene was Daring Do, feeling something she would fervently deny was concern.

"Take it..." Ahuizotl hissed through the pain as he handed the one piece of his regalia that wasn't warped by the heat of Tirek Sunstar's blast, the laser shooting gauntlet on his tail, to his long-time foe. "Make him pay..."

Daring was all too happy to ditch the current gauntlets she had as the water weapon they shot wasn't doing much more than creating steam when it hit the solar villain. She was also willing to honor her nemesis's request, since none should ever be the victim of the kind of systematic genocide Tirek Sunstar claimed he'd attempted against Ahuizotl's species. Unfortunately, she didn't see how it was going to improve things any.

"Good," the voice of Proto Mane startled her. "His weapon is intact. We'll need that."

"Why?!" Daring sniped at the robot. "It's not doing any more damage to Tirek Sunstar than anything *else* we throw at him! Only that... thing... of Dr. Wily's even hurt him!"

Even now, they could see Tirek Sunstar on the ground, flames burning the undergrowth and the dirt and stone melting and warping from the heat he put off. Wily's Le Devil creation was indeed occupying Tirek Sunstar's full attention, but the way the centaur kept incinerating large pieces of its form, that wasn't going to last.

"He targeted Ahuizotl for a reason," Blues replied. "The laser he shoots isn't hurting him more with each hit that anything else, but the way it changes direction in midair means it hits several times with each shot. It's the best weapon we've got after Wily's latest project. I've already transferred my data on it to Mega Mane and Mega Mare and they're getting in position. As soon as we get an opening, we're going to let him have it with all four barrels."

"Okay," Daring nodded. "Let's do this."

"Foul servant of darkness!" Tirek Sunstar cursed Le Devil as he endured another blast of dark magic. **"My holy light shall never be extinguished!"**

"Insolent relic of a bygone era!" Wily shouted back as Le Devil crashed to the ground after its leg was blasted off.

"You shall be the first to be cleansed!" the enraged centaur gathered power and unleashed a massive blast at the downed monstrosity.

The machine exploded with enough force to dissipate the energy wave and when the dust settled, Dr. Wily sat amidst some broken bits of machinery. A bit scraped and bruised, but alive. It was clear to those who knew how such things worked that he'd designed shaped charges into the cockpit to negate any force that breached its protections while not harming the pilot.

"And thus your taint is purged," the voice of his blazing opponent intoned with all the finality of an executioner.

But just before he unleashed the fatal blast at the doctor, Mega Mane tackled Wily out of the way.

"Argh!" Rock screamed as the end of one of his hind legs was clipped by the blast and melted clean off.

"A futile ges–"

"NOW!" Roll yelled and three lasers like Ahuizotl's weapon, the Spark Chaser, lanced through Tirek Sunstar repeatedly. For several long moments it appeared as if the powerful foe had been impaled by an entire cage of pure crackling light.

"ENOUGH!" the enraged bellow was accompanied by an explosion of flame that rushed over the entire battlefield.

Rainbow Dash tried her best to get her heart back under control after the wave of solar flame dissipated. She hadn't had time to analyze the pull on her Element when the centaur guy had lost it and had just thrown everything she could into the connection.

She'd forgotten that Twilight had told her and the others about her research into other ways to use the Elements. Most importantly at the moment, using them defensively. But as she looked down and saw everypony, and every non-pony, alive and well (24) she thanked whatever had possessed her egghead friend to do the research in the first place.

"So, you live," Tirek Sunstar, the great and holy light of all the world, observed as the so-called 'son of light' got to his remaining hooves. **"It shall–"**

He paused as he observed the way the stallion's leg terminated. It was not charred and blackened like flesh would be, but melted the entire way across. Even if the pretender did wear armor, it would not have done that.

"So... you are naught but a golem of metal pretending to be a pony," he mused. **"One who can not help but run to the rescue of his dark master."**

"Actually, Dr. Wily's my worst enemy," the golem replied calmly.

...What?

"Hey, Twilight?" the voice of Roll interrupted the local Anchor's thoughts again.

'Honestly, I'm starting to think this Loop likes *shooting down my decisions to solve the problems it sends my way with my incredible alicorn powers,'* Twilight mentally grumbled as she turned to hear whatever plan the robot mare was bringing to her. And with that tone, it really couldn't be anything else. "Yes?"

"How much protective magic can you send my brother's way?" the Mega Mare asked. "Discretely if at all possible."

"Quite a bit," Twilight replied, becoming more intrigued by the second. "Why?"

"Because Mega Mane's done analyzing how our opponent fights," she replied succinctly. "My brother's intending to end this as decisively as he can. One-on-one."

"Wait, he's going to challenge a *living sun* to a *duel* ?" Twilight blurted incredulously.

"It's not like it would be the first time," the mechanical mare shrugged in a resigned fashion.

The looping unicorn blinked a few times as she processed that. "We'd better hedge our bets and get Luna on board."

"Already done," Roll replied. "Blues says she sounds rather enthusiastic about it."

"Of course," Twilight rolled her eyes.

"What manner of being would save a mortal enemy from death?" Tirek sounded confused. Good. The less sure he was of things, the less dangerous he became.

"One who is living proof that your son was right," the Mega Mane replied calmly as he noted Dr. Wily inching away as unobtrusively as equinely possible. Even better. The further Wily was from this, the less likely he'd get hurt.

The strange and unique variant on his recurring foe Sunstar seemed to narrow his perception menacingly. **"Do explain."**

"Your son believed that all, no matter what station in life they were born to, deserved to be educated," Rock explained calmly as he began preparations for what he had planned. He could probably do it faster, but this would work so much better if he took his time. "This has already come to pass."

"What you speak of is madness."

"Maybe," he allowed as he began siphoning the magical energy from the wards placed on him into his weapon systems and linked them to a specific weapon in particular. "But it still works. If it didn't, I wouldn't exist. My creator is an earth pony. Without your son's philosophy in place, he'd have been just another farm worker toiling away in the fields."

"It would have been his place," the centaur glared. **"Those meant for growing food have no need for scholarly pursuits."**

"The fact that our farmers now can produce more food, of higher quality, and with less farmers, than anyone from your time would have believed possible suggests otherwise," Rock grinned as new magical energy began to flow into his systems. He'd need everything he could get. "But beyond that, your son believed that everyone, regardless of species or station, not only deserved a chance to learn, but a chance to live and prove themselves."

"A folly," Tirek Sunstar scoffed. **"Once the taint of darkness has taken root, only the purifying flame can cleanse it."**

"And there's our impasse," Rock nodded calmly. "You believe in no chances to anyone who doesn't fit your definition of 'pure'. I believe that everyone deserves not just *a* chance, but often also a *second* chance. It's why I'll risk my life even for a mortal enemy. We may falter into darkness along the way, but with a little faith and the help of friends we can come back into the light. It's the kind of world your son spent his life trying to create."

"My son was a fool. As are any who place their faith in his folly. Such madness can never be Just."

"And I say that such 'madness' is what *creates* Justice!" Rock shot back. "So I'm here to challenge you, Tirek Sunstar, last of an outdated and obsolete philosophy! A duel! Your Justice against mine! You take your best shot and then I take mine!"

"That's all I can give him," Twilight let out a long breath. "I hope your brother knows what he's doing."

"Twilight, since we started looping, Rock has faced various versions of Sunstar hundreds of times," Roll replied calmly.

Twilight blinked and reminded herself once again that for some loopers such opponents were the norm rather than the 'once in a weird variant' exception.

"He hasn't lost yet."

'Light's boy is out of his mind,' Dr. Wily thought numbly as he abandoned stealth in favor of putting more distance between himself and the showdown. Only to run face first into Break Mane.

Standing next to the lunar diarch herself.

"Not so fast, doc," the renegade prototype smirked. "We've still got some things to discuss after this."

"Indeed," Luna agreed as she absently restrained the doctor with her magic.

Rock didn't normally engage in psychological warfare, but as a pragmatic tool-using model, he naturally considered everything at his disposal when presented with a problem. That his goading had not only secured Tirek Sunstar's undivided attention, but his agreement to the duel he'd proposed was just step one. The easy step.

'Cross-wire with the Magnet Beam... Adjust frequency to optimal dispersal of enemy's energy weapon... Initiate thaumic energy boost from existing wards and infused magic...' he performed the final adjustments as Sunstar took his time dramatically gathering energy. *'Energy readings stable... Backup contingencies in place... Yes, I want to override my blasted safeties already... Pray like heck this guy's as superstitious as he sounds like...'*

Tirek Sunstar leveled his hands and the gathered energy between them in his direction and fired.

'Skull Barrier.'

Tirek Sunstar experienced a feeling of vindication as the insolent blue golem was consumed by his holy flame. There was, after all,

only one true Justice an–

He stared in shock as a shimmering glow of power not his own became visible as his flames died down. The shock grew as the shimmering became clearer to show it had a shape. The shape of an equine skull forming a protective barrier over the metal golem. His holy flames licked at the energy hungrily, but it held firm.

'Impossible! None may possess the favor of Death! Even I in my Holy and Just cause was refused!'

"H-how do you possess the favor of Death?!" Tirek demanded. **"HOW?!"**

"Maybe because I go out of my way to not make work for him," Rock retorted as he took stock. The forelimb he'd used to generate the barrier had blown almost every circuit it had to pump power into the shield, but it had worked. Even better, Tirek believed it was some divine favor from the local equivalent of the grim reaper. The damaged forelimb, while otherwise useless, could still support his weight and his other forelimb was still in good working order. He could work with that. "Anyway, that was your best shot, right?"

"Your contest is the dishonorable rambling of a tainted mind!" Tirek fumed as Rock raised his remaining forelimb, formed it into a hoof cannon, and took aim. The centaur began to form energy in his hands, sloppily from his anger. **"Even were you able to harm me, I am not bound by your treasonous barg–"**

He was cut off by an explosion in his face and lost control of his flame, but even Rock could see he was more dazed than hurt.

" *That* is your best shot?" Tirek Sunstar challenged.

"No, that was just to get your attention," Rock stated flatly. "My best shot... is everything."

And with that pronouncement, the robot known as Mega Mane proceeded to, in fact, shoot everything at his opponent.

Twilight stared at where Rock, the Mega Mane, was blasting everything at Tirek Sunstar. He switched weapons so fast that his color-changing armor looked like a rainbow having a spasm (25) as it tried to match each one for the instant it was in use.

Bombs flew after fire flew after ice flew after blades flew after water flew after lightning and on and on creating a giant blur of elemental violence that pummeled the living sun.

"How...?" Twilight tried to make sense of what she was seeing. Tirek Sunstar had seemed almost invincible before, but now he was looking like an amateur. Every shot he tried to fire back was countered before it even left his hand or flew so wide that it seemed the safest place to stand was directly behind the robot firing on him.

"Because that's what my brother does," Roll replied next to her. "Blues may be military and I may take to fighting styles better than Rock, but this is what he's the best at. He analyzes everything about his opponents. Their powers, their patterns, their tells, their attitude, the way their armor moves and fits together, all of it. He studies them as he fights, and then when he's got everything he needs, he uses it to take them apart."

"Huh," Twilight mulled that over. "I wonder what goes through his mind at times like this?"

'I swear, one of these days I'm going to end up copying a weapon that shoots kitchen sinks,' Rock mused as he monitored the armor integrity of his opponent. His ability to control and direct his solar flames should be reaching bottom right about...

Tirek fell to his knees.

...now.

Rock stopped firing.

"It... appears that victory is indeed yours," Tirek admitted reluctantly from where he knelt involuntarily. **"I almost feel remorse that for you it shall be a bitter one."**

Rock could hear the smile in the centaur's voice and it sent alarms blaring through his mind.

"Almost."

Luna went rigid as she felt the magic of Tirek Sunstar shift and teleported herself, her companion, and her captive directly to Twilight's side.

"Twilight Sparkle," she rushed, "it appears we have made an error most grave, our foe's power–"

"Isn't dissipating safely, I know," Twilight was starting to go pale. "It's going critical." *'If he blows, it'll ignite the entire atmosphere!'*

And if her scan was correct, they had a little over fifteen minutes before the world ended.

"You don't have to do this!" Rock pleaded. "The world your son dreamed of can be yours too! We can give you a second chance! A chance to live in peace and harmony!"

"He he he..." Tirek chuckled. **"I was wrong. You are not tainted. Merely hopelessly naive. Like my son. But I would not stop my holy quest for him and I shall not for you. I swore an oath to cleanse this world, one that I ensured I would be able to keep even with my dying breath."**

A rainbow light from the Elements of Harmony chose to strike him at that moment, but even now Tirek Sunstar proved unmovable to the supreme expression of light magic.

"It is over!" the centaur laughed madly. "There is nothing you can do to stop it! The world shall be cleansed!"

'Damnit!' Twilight fumed as her telekinesis failed to grasp the centaur every bit as the last use of the Elements did. And even if she could fling him away, would she get him high enough fast enough? "ARGH! I don't know what to do! Tirek's going to blow sky high and burn the whole world to a cinder and I can't stop it! Why are the Elements not working?!"

"What if we reversed them?" Rainbow Dash suddenly spoke up.

"I don't think putting them on backwards will do anything, darling," Rarity was close to hyperventilating and trying to hide it.

"Well, we gotta try somethin'!" Applejack started fiddling with her necklace, clearly intending to do what Rarity had claimed was pointless.

"No!" Rainbow shook her head. "I mean, why don't we reverse us? Like instead of focusing our positive traits through the Elements, we focus our negative ones? This guy is all light, right? Well, Blues was telling me a while back that all light isn't very harmonious." She pointed her hoof at Luna before continuing. "Like day needs the night to balance it out, we all have darker shadowy sides to ourselves to balance out the traits the Elements represent. So why can't we use *those* to blast him?"

"I..." Twilight stopped herself from saying that it wouldn't work as she realized she hadn't actually *tried* that in looping memory. There hadn't ever been any need to. She racked her mind for everything she knew about the Elements for a few seconds and concluded that none of it would render the action *impossible* . Difficult and unlikely,

perhaps, but not impossible. "What negative traits were you thinking of?"

"Well, Rarity's clearly got Ambition," Rainbow Dash began.

"But of course, darling," Rarity huffed. "Nothing wrong with wanting to be the pinnacle of fabulousness, is there?"

"No, of course not," Dash agreed, "but that's not the point. Where Generosity is all about others, Ambition is all about yourself. But they're linked, see? Generosity wants to give and Ambition wants to have, but you can't give what you don't have."

"I see..." Rarity hemmed a bit, before brightening. "Oh, my. I *do* see!"

"Fluttershy's normally kind," Dash continued, "and that's great, but it's not what we need right now. We need Ferocity. Not the gentle healer that mends hurts, but the angry mama bear that stops them by ripping the hurter a new one."

"Of course," Fluttershy's gaze hardened as she thought to her adopted son of another Loop and the trials he regularly underwent. "If that's what's needed."

"Pinkie, you gotta give up Laughter for a bit and do Sorrow instead," the blue pegasus continued.

"But Dashie, you know I don't do sad!" Pinkie smiled, a bit confused.

"Pull the other one, Pinks," Dash retorted. "You're the friendliest mare I know. You care about pretty much everypony. So how would you feel if we just... weren't there one day? If we were dead, or we'd left without saying goodbye, or–"

"Okay, you're right," Pinkie admitted as her mane deflated and her eyes teared up. But she was still smiling, sadly, but smiling. "I'd be really sad if that happened. So, yeah, I can be sad for a friend."

"And what about me?" Applejack snorted. "Honesty don't do well with lyin'."

"No, but valuing the truth means understanding Deception," Dash folded her forelimbs. "And self-deception counts miss 'Sure I can buck the whole field, I just gotta give up on little things like eating and sleeping'."

"Okay, I deserved that," Applejack admitted. She'd honestly thought she could pull that off without her fancy looping powers this time. She hadn't counted on waking up in the hospital with Nurse Redheart giving her a nasty look and no memory of when and how she collapsed. Maybe this 'deception' wasn't lying outright, it was understanding how what was true and what wasn't could get muddled up in someone's head. That she certainly had experience with. "Looks like ya got my number after all. But what about you?"

"Me?" the Unawake Element of Loyalty rolled her eyes as if it was obvious. "I've got Suspicion out the wazoo. I don't easily trust anypony outside my group of friends. It's part of how I look out for all of you."

"And me?" Twilight asked. "How do you reverse Magic?"

"Heh," Dash chuckled. "You know that Magic used to be referred to as what the Magi knew?"

"Well, yeah," Twilight's Unawake self had known about the legendary Magi unicorns for a while, "but I don't... Oh. Oh! Duh! You're saying my Element's not just about friendship, it's about knowledge!"

"Yeah, you love learning all that egghead stuff Twi," Rainbow poked her with a hoof. "But where the positive is learning new things and discovering stuff, the negative is keeping it all to yourself. And don't tell me you don't play it close to the chest sometimes."

Twilight blushed as Rainbow hit the nail on the head. How many times had she told her friends, Awake or otherwise, to trust her, she

knew what she was doing? She *didn't* share everything with them. And she'd gotten really good at keeping secrets. "I... I think this could actually work. Okay, places girls! We've got a world to save!"

They got into formation one more time, this time doing their best to focus on the not-so-bright parts of themselves that they were often loath to admit to. The Elements didn't respond at first, but slowly they began to darken and then radiate a shadowy 'light'. Each of them rose up in turn as the shadows grew in strength and intensity, the Elements shaking in protest.

'It's working, but the Elements weren't designed to do this,' Twilight observed. She almost told the others, but stopped herself. *'Telling them won't improve our chances. They don't need to know yet.'*

With that re-affirmation of her darker personality trait, the Elements reached the peak of their power and a Rainbow of Shadows burst forth and struck the downed Tirek Sunstar and began to struggle with him.

'Ergh!' Twilight grunted. *'He's still resisting! Turning to stone... Yeah, what body? He's a living fusion reaction! Cleansing of his overly light nature and madness? Ngh... No, we aren't putting out enough force with this setting. Banishment...? Moon's refusing a connection. He's too solar. Gotta be the sun... Gah!'*

"Luna!" Twilight managed to force out as she maintained the Rainbow of Shadows under the protesting Elements. "We need to banish him to the sun, but the connection's... not strong enough at night! You gotta raise..."

"If thou needst the sun to rise, then it shall be so!" Luna declared and focused all of her might on forcing the newly-set sun back over the horizon. Slowly, the western horizon changed color as the sun reversed course, and as the first rays peeked over, the connection was made and Tirek Sunstar was blasted off the planet in a trail of shadows. Straight for the sun.

Tirek Sunstar, the most Holy and Just being in all the world, raged as he was deposited in the sun's fiery furnace. It didn't harm him, any more than the sea would harm a bucket's worth of water, but it also didn't stop his armor's containment from failing. He was Holy! His cause was Just! The world needed to be cleans–

Within the sun, Tirek Sunstar exploded with a fury that would have ended all life on the world he just came from and burnt what remained to cinders.

The sun didn't notice.

"We... We won..." Twilight heaved from the exertion forcing the Elements to perform in a way never intended had put her through.

The trip back to Canterlot had happened much faster than the trip out. With Dr. Light's teleportation network back up, each of the robots was able to take a passenger back with them. Dr. Wily was firmly in custody, but Ahuizotl had somehow slipped off in the aftermath despite his injuries (as had the other incapacitated members of his group for that matter). Daring was certain he'd turn up again. He always did.

Rock had been rushed to the makeshift lab Dr. Light had set up for repairs, with Roll and the Cossack numbers patiently awaiting their turns. Blues had claimed that he could manage his own repairs just fine and had promptly vanished.

Luna had stubbornly refused a regeneration spell for her hoof, claiming that battle scars were to be worn with pride. Celestia had managed to at least talk her into begrudgingly trying one of the latest prosthetics in lieu of healing after much worrying and shedding of tears.

As for the Elements of Harmony and co, they were taking some well-earned relaxation time. Or at least as much relaxation as could be

had with Dash and Gilda retelling the adventure to an insistent CMC, and their griffon guest Kalinka, with increasingly ludicrous embellishments on each retelling. Twilight had ten bits on their narrative having the planet explode within the next five revisions.

Daring Do on the other hoof was holed up translating a holographic scan of the writings in the temple. She seemed very excited about it. Excited enough that Twilight was on edge waiting for her to finish and tell the rest of them.

Dr. Wily Plan... was awaiting trial.

"Forsooth, yon skills are most impressive Master Light," Luna complimented the scientist as she idly flexed the gleaming cybernetic prosthesis now replacing her incinerated hoof. "Were it not for the loss of touch, we wouldst be incapable of perceiving the difference."

"Well, your body does already know what your limb is supposed to be doing," Dr. Light tried to deflect the praise. "It's just a matter of making it so the device lets it."

"Thy humility does thee credit, Master Light," Luna smiled. "But one shouldst not understate their own skills ei–"

"Hey, Doc!" Rainbow Dash sped into the room and halted for a moment at the sight of the lunar diarch. "Er... Hey, Luna. Sorry to interrupt, but Daring says she's got that ancient writing stuff translated and wants to invite everypony to hear it!"

"That sounds most intriguing," Dr. Light rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. "What do you think, princess?"

"We do think we would like to hear the ancient tale of the Magi and the tyrant sun as written by the Magi themselves," Luna replied eagerly. "Let us make haste!"

"Thank you all for coming," Daring nodded to the room. The Elements of Harmony, all three princesses, the Light family, the Cossack family, a few of the guard (including the captain), some assorted robots, and a group of fillies tagging along filled the meeting hall. Behind her, a hologram of one of the walls in the Lanfront appeared. "As you know, I have been working to translate the writings of the Lanfront ruins for the past few days. Just so you know, this is an ancient written language, so mistakes tend to be made. One of the problems with them is that they're all nouns and verbs, and are just starting to grasp the concept of adjectives. Things like pronouns, adverbs, connecting words, and all the other little things we take for granted are supposed to be gleaned from context and word ordering. So I hope you'll forgive me for embellishing a little."

"This is the fate of the tyrant Sunstar, whose light consumes all it touches. Once, he was a good and noble being, but the trials of leading the world's races and the dying curse of the mad queen turned him into a mockery of himself. And so I, Le Tor, his son in heart if not in body, formed the Magi to save the world from its savior."

"The Magi were dedicated to the idea that all have a right to seek enlightenment and so I invited members of every race to come and study the deepest reaches of power and wisdom. To gleen hidden knowledge by which we could both protect the races of the world and teach them to protect themselves."

"We mastered the forces of nature first. The storms in the heavens, the cleansing power of the seas, the strength of the earth, and the flames of the world's core. We even learned to move the sun and moon by our own might and to contain the most dreaded of beings."

"But the tyrant Sunstar shed his mortal form and became a living sun, declaring himself the only light the world needed. He declared entire races tainted and began to hunt them down without cause. He had to be stopped, but his form was proof against light magic. And so the Magi created a prison of darkness to hold light most foul. Its

power shall endure as long as the tyrant Sunstar's immortal flame burns."

"I, the alicorn Le Tor, led the force that defeated him, and he fell cursing us all for eternity. Myself most of all. In his words, my life was one of the mad queen's last foul wishes, and I had proven myself her son at last. I am troubled by this."

"This is where the writing style shifts," Daring explained, breaking the narrative. "Le Tor's entries end and someone else continues for him."

"The Magi have been betrayed. The great alicorn Le Tor, may his spirit rest in the boundless heavens, brought us together under the banner of equality and friendship, but it seems not all wished to share the secret knowledge we have gained. Lord Silver and his wife Platinum were invited as the representatives of the unicorns for their ability to channel mystical forces through their horns, but now it is clear they never thought of the rest of us as equals. We were merely tools to be used and then discarded when no longer of use."

"With the tyrant Sunstar imprisoned, they grew bold. Le Tor, the only one who would claim we demons of Ahuizotl as friends, was slain in his sleep. Spykoran of the dragons fell to pyrite poisoning. The others were killed most cowardly one by one until only I, the nameless demon of Ahuizotl, remained. I have used the power of the prison to seal this place against intruders. The lust for power that Lord Silver, Lady Platinum, and their unicorn followers possess is endless and their selfishness regarding the knowledge meant for all is beyond reasoning. They have taken everything, including the name of the Magi, for themselves. There is naught I can do but leave this record in the hopes that one day the truth will be known."

The room was silent for several moments after that.

"What does the 'nameless demon of Ahuizotl' mean?" Dash asked first. "I mean, that guy can't be *that* old, can he?"

"No," Daring shook her head. "Though the symbol Ahuizotl always uses for himself is the only reason I recognized the word. My guess is it's a place that his species was originally from. As for the 'nameless' thing, it doesn't translate well. The word would more literally mean 'one who has given up his name to serve his fellows', an honored title for the time, but that's a bit of a mouthful."

"Indeed," Celestia agreed. "This would be quite controversial in many circles, I'm sure you all understand, but the events fit what we know to have come after."

"The tale of Hearth's Warming," Twilight supplied.

"Quite so," Celestia nodded. "Speaking of which my student, I was meaning to ask if you and your friends would like to perform in Canterlot's annual production of the tale this winter?"

"WOULD WE?!" Pinkie's instant agreement drowned out any other replies.

The trial had been surprisingly swift despite the complicated nature of the events. Dr. Wily had been incredibly subdued after being caught in the backwash of the Elements when Tirek was banished. He had remained that way since their return from the ruins and he sat through the court proceedings seemingly resigned to his fate. He hadn't even attempted to defend himself, pleading guilty right off the bat. Rock and Roll allowed as to how it was very uncharacteristic of the stallion.

Even now as the sentence was being hoofed down, his head hung despondent and barely responsive.

"Dr. Wily Plan," Judge Scales proclaimed from the bench, "after reviewing the evidence and the testimony of all involved parties, this court does hereby accept your plea of guilty to the crime of assault upon the sovereign lands of Equestria. However, due to the influence of the dark magic known as the 'Nightmare Force' upon your mind

and the precedent set by The Ponies of Equestria vs Luna Equis several months prior, leniency has been granted in sentencing. You are hereby on probation for a term of no less than five years. You will be remanded to the custody of Light Labs and are not to be unsupervised at any time. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your honor," Dr. Wily stated without emotion. "Thank you, your honor."

"Dismissed!"

"It's weird," Rock was telling Twilight later when they were away from non-looping ears. "I've *never* seen Dr. Wily like that. Usually he's clinging to the possibility of his innocence with all the fervor of a raccoon with its hand stuck in a bottle because it won't let go of the thing it reached in to get."

"That's a pretty long-winded metaphor," Twilight snorted in amusement.

"Yeah, I need to work on those," Rock rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "But still, Wily likes to take any avenue to protest his innocence. Sometimes while he's plotting his next scheme at the same time. But sometimes he really is the innocent victim of manipulation, at least initially, and usually I'm right there getting the evidence to help prove it."

"About that," Twilight interrupted, "Why?"

"Because of all the ways we keep trying to reform him, this second chance is the one that's repeatedly come the closest to working," Rock lamented.

"Well, he *did* get the backwash of the elements this time," Twilight theorized.

"And I'm hoping that does the trick," the blue bomber nodded. "But, well, we'll see."

"I suppose we will," the purple unicorn agreed. "Also, I've been meaning to ask you about that last stand against Tirek Sunstar. How did you know it would work?"

"I didn't know for sure," Rock admitted. "That's why I had the Chaos Emeralds in my subspace pocket on standby so I could go Super just in case it didn't."

Twilight stared at her fellow Anchor for a long moment, her eye twitching. "And precisely *when* were you going to tell me you had those?!"

Rock blinked. "I thought I had... Right after... No, not the parasprite incident... It was after Wily's second attack... Let's see, there was the thing with Philomena... Why is this encrypted...? Ah! Right after you and the other Awake loopers took us into the Everfree to show off your alicorn forms."

Twilight facehooved. "Rock, we were drunk off our plots that day. We were lucky we remembered *anything* that happened then."

"Oh, right, *that's* why those memories were encrypted," Rock made a face. "I did *not* need to remember Rarity and Spike doing that."

"I am *so* jealous of you right now," Twilight grumbled. "But still, if you had those, why didn't you use them?"

"Because while the Super form is cool and all, it's still one of the 'nuclear' options and I don't like using those if I don't absolutely have to," Rock explained. "I don't particularly like fighting to begin with, really."

"Yeah, that," Twilight latched into the fact about her new friend that had been bugging her all Loop. "That's what I can't quite figure out about you. You know our offer of sanctuary is on the table, but you

never want to take it. You've insisted on handling Dr. Wily your way and we've honored that so long as it doesn't get too far out of hoof, like this last time. But you're not an adventure junkie like some loopers we get who like to be 'hooves-on'. You're more like the crowd who get thrust into wars they don't want and desperately need a respite from all the craziness and fighting in their home Loops, a place to rest where they don't have to rush out and save the world every time a threat rears its head. Honestly, it might have been harder than usual, but I think we could have taken care of Dr. Wily, his robots, the Star Druids, and even Sunstar without you. Probably even without giving your antagonistic Dreamer knowledge of anything more dangerous than he already has. So why don't you take it?"

"I've tried it a few times," Rock admitted. "A few Loops when my sister was Awake and I'd felt weary of the whole thing we agreed that she'd be 'Mega Woman' and I'd be just the brother who stayed back and supported from the sidelines. I wasn't too bad at it either. I got to develop some neat stuff for my sister with dad during the Loop too, but every time Roll went out, I'd worry. I know she can take care of herself, especially now, but staying back while someone else did all the hard and dangerous work just... felt wrong. It still does. I... I can't *not* save the world when I have the power to do so, Twilight. It just isn't in me."

Twilight didn't reply for several long seconds. Rock's attitude was one she could relate to. It was why they'd offered their Loop as a sanctuary in the first place. It was why they went above and beyond the original offer when those like Leah Clearwater and Kakashi landed in Equestria. They couldn't *not* help others who needed it.

"I... I guess I can understand that."

Dr. Wily watched listlessly as Dr. Cossack and his daughter bid farewell before teleporting home. Nothing seemed to matter anymore since he'd had that moment of clarity. He'd allowed jealousy to overcome his reason and lead him down a foolish path, and for

what? To drag what little good name he had through the mud? To prove to the world that genius like his came with dangerous madness?

"Wily Plan?" the voice of his long-time friend, did he even deserve such a thing?, cut into his thoughts.

"What is it, To-Bright Light?" he responded without feeling. Nothing seemed important anymore. He'd failed as thoroughly as it was possible to fail.

"There's something I want you to see, my friend," Bright Light smiled warmly. "A project I need your help on."

"What kind of project?" Dr. Wily asked despite his depression as he followed his friend and colleague. "What could you possibly... Why do you have an elevator in a one-floor lab?"

That hadn't been there before...

"It's part of what I need to show you," Dr. Light smiled as the doors opened. Dr. Wily felt something like a ghost of his old spark. Curiosity. The driving force of all discovery. What did this lead to?

He followed.

"After your first..." Light began before stopping himself.

"Invasion, Bright Light," Wily huffed as the elevator began to descend at a slow pace. "Call it what it was."

"Yes, that," Light agreed without actually saying the word. "After that, Celestia approached me with a proposition. Tell me, are you familiar with the legend of the Lord of Chaos?"

"Discord?" Wily wrinkled his nose in disgust. "A cautionary fable about disharmony with no basis in fact."

"Yes, much like Nightmare Moon," Light smiled. "Or Tirek Sunstar. Apparently he's quite real. And the seal keeping him imprisoned is weakening."

"Because of me, right?" Wily sighed.

"Your actions didn't do it any favors, no," Light admitted, "but it would have weakened all the same. Anyway, the seal cannot be renewed without breaking it first, and only the Elements themselves can do so deliberately. And while Celestia has faith in the current bearers, she neither wishes to disrupt their lives with the knowledge nor does she wish to place all her faith in one solution. So she commissioned Light Labs to create an anti-Discord countermeasure. She has even allowed the use of normally forbidden magical artifacts, specifically ones supposedly designed to counter Chaos magic, to ensure it succeeds."

"What kind of countermeasure?" Wily asked as he noted the elevator was still descending. Even if it was slow, they should have reached their destination by now. How far down did this go?

"Well, I was hoping the support units could be those robot masters we designed together," Light smiled at him. "Which I would of course need your help to build."

"Of course," Wily agreed, beginning to feel a small portion of his old enthusiasm. "And the main unit?"

"Well," Light started, only to be interrupted as the elevator finally stopped. "Ah, we're here. How about you see for yourself?"

Wily stepped out of the doors and looked up. And up. And higher up still. At the frame of a truly gigantic robot. How had his old friend found the time to make *this?!*

"Wily, my friend," Light introduced happily, "meet Project Gamma."

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*) Theme song plus extended lyrics version by kajisora.

1) Pansy had decided to take a nap for the Loop instead of getting put into a body of her own. Though Scoots put a few notes into her subspace pocket to help with the 'mobile armor of the founders' project next time she and Applebloom were Awake together.

2) Silver-Bot apparently got the 'understatement' upgrade.

3) Like Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. Don't ask.

4) Rainbow Dash: Light Labs assistant. She helps put the pony-oriented inventions through their paces. If she were Awake, she'd probably rate the coolness of the job somewhere around 'Mythbusters'.

5) Dr. Wily was backstage. Loop memories would show that mixing Dr. Wily with the media tended to prove... volatile. But that reporter stallion's mane and tail eventually grew back.

6) Ham To Ham Combat.

7) Plus she hasn't told him he's going yet.

8) This isn't the first time Nyx has Awoken to a mother that's missed her terribly and it likely won't be the last.

9) Tercel = Male eagle. Figured it was a good 'man' equivalent for a griffin.

10) Yep, Wood Man got translated into a robot timberwolf. With control over other timberwolves. Yikes.

11) Alternate theme song by conceptulist.

12) Sanity requirement for Rock's potential girlfriends: No homicidal maniacs. Basically, Pinkie passes, Waltz does not.

13) The lyrics are adapted from History Repeating part 1 and 2 by The Megas. Seriously, if you haven't heard their stuff go check it out.

14) The first eight villains mentioned are from the TvTropes 'just for fun' section regarding the Daring Do series. I rather had fun searching them all out to match the Stardroids.

15) Pinkie Pie logic. Not for the uninitiated.

16) I consider rhyming a Zecora thing rather than a zebra thing.

17) Roll tagged his armor to scan and copy his weapon on her way past.

18) Wait, that's not how this normally works...

19) Insert "Nothing Can Stop the Smooze" from the MLP Gen 1 movie here.

20) Flutterdragon is best pony.

21) Not this Loop anyway.

22) You should see her opponent.

23) Neither did some of the griffons enacting this punishment.

24) If a little on the crispy side in a few cases.

25) Like Mario with one of his stars.

Mega Sonic Part 4

Mega Sonic: Part 4

Quint was doing his best to process the latest development in his and Silver's ongoing quest to hunt down Eggman Nega. They'd followed the sociopath's trail through a dimensional portal and ended up on an island where they were 'rescued' by a young female raccoon mobian who insisted on tagging along. Or rather building a ship and being captain with Quint and Silver serving as her shipmates. And was so forceful and hyperactive that Quint actually found himself at a loss to refuse.

And that was all before one considered the mechanical pirates (many of which were so far making a rather satisfying 'crunch' sound when he used Sakugarne on them) and the fact that he and Silver had apparently ended up in Blaze's home dimension. With... not much to indicate if they had really met the pyrokinetic feline before or not. The incident with Solaris had wiped the meeting from their timeline after all, but did that erasure extend to Blaze's dimension as well?

"Little girl?!" the hyperactive raccoon, Marine, yelled at the older female cat who was doing her best to hid a smirk. "You gonna treat me just like any old sheila, then, are you? Silver! Quint! Don't let her yabber about your captain like that! Get her! Keelhaul her! Make her walk the plank!"

Silver looked completely gobsmacked at the command and Quint was still trying to parse if the young girl actually had sufficient authority to *issue* such a command when Blaze began laughing at the scene, which just set Marine off again. (1)

'I wonder if anything like this is happening back in our dimension?' the robot from the future found himself wondering.

Storm knew he wasn't the brightest. That didn't really bother him. Being called dumb tended to flare his temper because he knew he wasn't really dumb. He just liked things simple.

Racing? Simple.

Rivalries? Simple.

Following orders? Simple.

Beating up people who stuck their nose in where it didn't belong? Simple.

Getting treasure from ancient tombs like the Gigan Rocks? Simple. Dangerous and difficult, but simple.

The boss claiming to have come back in time? Eh... not so simple. Frankly it made Storm's head hurt. But if the boss said it was so, then it was so. (2)

Wave though she was so smart, and okay she was, but in Storm's book the truly smart ones knew how to keep stuff simple. Like the boss. Jet was smart enough to take all the weird confusing things Wave always spouted and make them simple. Jet was one of the truly smart ones.

So while Storm would happily laugh at Wave for believing in the old tale of shooting stars granting wishes, if Jet thought there was something to it... then maybe there really was.

And when an impact in the distance caused the ground to shake and set off the trap Jet had disarmed... well...

'I wish something would save us!' Storm closed his eyes and pleaded to the shooting stars above with all his silent might as the stones from above toppled down upon the Babylon Rogues.

And amazingly, something did. The treasure that Jet had collected flashed with light and suddenly everything was suspended in the air. Jet, Wave, Storm himself, and the boulders that had been about to crush them.

'Never again,' Storm promised himself as the new power the treasure had granted Jet drew them all back through the ruins at incredible speeds. *'Never again will I doubt the power of a shooting star!'*

Off in the distance, at the point of the meteor impact that had triggered the trap, stood a large sprawling facility that filled an older crater. One just remote enough that it's large size had managed to go mostly unnoticed by the world in general.

The meteor had struck a building, but when it reached one of the interior chambers it flashed with power and halted in midair. Anyone present could have identified the object as a ringed cylindrical shape, about the size of a very thick bracelet, before it seemed to remember gravity was a thing and dropped. As it struck the ground, it rolled forward until it was stopped by what appeared to be a metal foot shaped like a swim fin.

An instant after it had stopped, the figure the foot belonged to, a green, yellow and pink aquatic robot (with a blue air tank on its back for some reason) holding a trident flared to life. Next to it, eight more models, four on each side and all unique, came online as well. Behind all nine, a horde of identical humanoid robots with a single red optic each activated in rapid succession to where it looked like a wave of red lights appearing. Far in the back, a giant screen flared to life and displayed a crude digital face.

Then the nine unique models opened fire on the wall of the chamber and marched out, leading the army of robots out into the world. None of them paid any heed to the chunk of wall that they marched over bearing the words 'MeteoTech Security Systems'.

"Robots made by the leading security company Meteotech are no longer responding to commands, and and are running amok all over the world. The international security organization GUN has begun to investigate the event. Meteotech has not issued a formal–"

Rock turned the radio off and sighed. It looked like he was going to have to pay the head of MeteoTech a visit...

"Heh..." Sonic grinned as he fiddled with the metallic ring Tails had found last night during the meteor shower as he, the fox, and Knuckles, leisurely drove a hovercar through one of the tunnel transits in Monopole. "Looks like it's that time again. Wonder how it's gonna be different this time?"

"Not sure," Tails allowed. "Some things have gone pretty similar to the recently restored baseline even with the addition of Rock and others from his Loop, but a few other things have, well..."

"Gone completely off script?" Knuckles interjected, thinking of a certain insane robotic madwoman.

"Yeah," Tails nodded, only for any further speculation to be cut off by alarms sounding and a deluge of Extreme Joes, that is white-armored Joe-model robots riding Extreme Gear, and a bunch of Extreme Gear capable Metools began pouring from access and maintenance areas off the tunnel's sides.

"Oh, right," Sonic grinned as he prepared himself, "MeteoTech's using these things this Loop."

"Huh..." Shadow blinked as he beheld the opponents Team Dark had been dispatched to fight. In addition to the generic Extreme Joes and Extreme Mets rampaging through the city, there were a pair of what looked like robot masters. One was primarily gray, with polished steel torso armor and a giant helmet shaped like a shark's head

complete with fin. The other was a rather plain-looking red-armored robot that had one arm ending in a nozzled flamethrower. (3)

And they were both riding Extreme Gear.

"This could prove interesting," he grinned.

"Nice to see you all again," Blues greeted the Chaotix as they all took cover. "Wish it was under better circumstances."

"You and me both Pogo Man," Vector grumbled. He and the other Chaotix had just been out shopping when the horde of robots using Extreme Gear had attacked. "I mean, we're not even getting paid for this! I *hate* doing pro-bono work!"

"Still better than the alternative of just letting them shoot us," Mighty shot back.

"I can see the yellow one from here," Espio reported, referring to one of the two robot masters leading the attack.

"We don't have a visual on the other one though," Shade added from where she was scanning the area.

"Um..." Charmy interrupted as he pointed behind the group at a purple-armored robot mounted on an Extreme Gear like the rest with an arm weapon that sported some rather sharp-looking blades. (4)

"I-i-i-is that h-him?" Ray gulped.

"Consarn it!" Bunnie swore as she and the rest of the Freedom Fighters chased after the robot master with a helmet shaped like an oil can who had robbed the museum of a rare artifact said to have fallen from space. "Of course the varmint would have a partner! And backup!"

"You need to give that back!" Cream yelled as she tried to take the stolen object with a dive-bomb assault, only to be blasted out of the air with water from the blue-armored robot master. (5)

"Gotcha!" Rotor caught the young rabbit before she hit anything.

"Damnit!" Amy yelled as she swung her Piko Hammer at several of the Mets and Joes surrounding them. "I could have been with Sonic! But no, you all just had to attack and mess up my plans!"

"The red one's getting away!" Sally yelled in frustration from where she was occupied.

"Go, my princess!" Antoine declared as he swung in and engaged Sally's opponents, freeing her up. "We shall thwart ze pursuink! You retrieve ze stolen goods!"

"One more thing. The Babylonian scrolls say there are five Arks of the Cosmos. One serves as the master unit. Whi–"

"While the other four attract and serve under it. Yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before, remember? They attract each other through a unique energy signature, which means you can build a radar to track that signature. Get on it."

Wave shook her head. It was still so unbelievable that Jet had traveled through time, but the way he just seemed to know about certain things ahead of time supported the theory. The Jet from before he'd arrived from the future could never follow the technical side that she took care of, but now he finished her thoughts half the time. Usually with the bored monotone of a reluctantly memorized fact. (6) "Jet, why are we heading to MeteoTech right now, when the radar you had me build shows one of the Arks of the Cosmos in the other direction? And closer?"

"Because the robots from this place are clearly looking for them," Jet smirked. "What does that tell you?"

Wave considered the question for a moment. "That... That someone from MeteoTech is actively collecting for the Arks as well. Which means they might know where the others are that are currently out of range of my radar..."

"Yes. And others who have found an Ark and made the connection will also be heading there as well."

"So we get dere first and clobber dem 'til dey give us da Arks!" Storm pounded his fist into his palm enthusiastically.

"Something like that," Jet agreed.

"Man, these guys are even more persistent than those SCR-GP things Eggman usually makes," Sonic breathed as he and the others took cover in Monopole's immense botanical gardens and considered their next move. Well, that and wait for Amy to fin–

"Get down!" a familiar voice that wasn't Amy's yelled right before a thick blob of something moving at high velocity splintered a nearby tree.

"Sal?" Sonic blinked as he took in the sight of Princess Sally trying to fend off a red-armored robot master with an oil can for a helmet riding an Extreme Gear even as the thing continued shooting... were those blobs of grease?... at her.

"Fight now, explanations later!" Knuckles yelled as he charge in, fists swinging. "Yaaaaahhh!"

The unfamiliar robot master (7) turned to face the new threat and Sally took the opening for all it was worth. She activated her energy wrist-blades and slashed deep into the robot's armor, causing it to spark wildly before going inactive.

"Nice one Aunt Sally!" Tails cheered as the princess deactivated her blades. "But what are you doing here? Usually Amy's the one caught

up in all of this."

NICOLE chimed to life from her spot on Sally's waist. "Amy Rose and the rest of the Freedom Fighters are engaged with the rampaging MeteoTech forces elsewhere while we pursued this unit in order to recover what it had stolen."

To punctuate her friend's statement, Sally pulled out the thick metallic ring she'd recovered before the fight had begun in earnest. She also looked pointedly at the similar object Sonic wore around his wrist.

"I think it's time we asked MeteoTech what's going on, don't you?" she gave Sonic her best impression of the hedgehog's own trademark smirk as she pulled her Extreme Gear back out of her subspace pocket.

"As you command, oh princess!" Sonic gave an overly dramatic bow.

Sally blinked as the Extreme Joes raced right past their hiding place and straight for a trio of figures she'd managed to miss in her efforts to be stealthy.

And right before the robots reached the three, there was a flare of power and the robots were suddenly suspended in midair as if weightless. A burst of movement from the three and the robots were flung hard into the wall where their armor buckled and their frames sparked from the impact before falling to the floor, useless.

The three figures landed and Sally recognized the avian forms immediately. The Babylon Rogues.

"It's been a while, Sonic the Hedgehog," the green-feathered Jet smirked in challenge.

"Hey Jet," Sonic waved in a friendly manner, "how's it hanging?"

"Long time, no see shorty," the magenta-feathered Wave sauntered forward, looking straight at Tails.

"Nice to see you again too, Wave," the two-tailed fox smiled.

"You better not get in our way," the big gray-feathered Storm challenged.

"And who's gonna stop us, Storm?" Knuckles growled back, brandishing his fist. Always ready for a fight that one.

"Oh, calm down," Jet admonished his muscular companion before turning to Sally and eyeing the large metallic ring she'd temporarily replaced one of her energy blade generating bracelets with.

She had to admit, despite the supremely short amount of time she'd had to use it, being able to manipulate gravity to turn sharp corners, ride on walls, or essentially free-fall forwards at incredible speeds was something she'd quickly grown fond of.

"Surrender the Arks of the Cosmos immediately!"

"Hey, Jet, cool it!" Sonic chuckled. "Girls hate guys who rush them, you know."

Sally was about to say that Sonic was one to talk when the confused look on Jet's face registered.

"That... wasn't me..." Jet said warily.

As one, the seven individuals turned to where the voice had come from to see a small army robots mounted on Extreme Gear. Most were the identical white-armored Extreme Joes with a few Extreme Mets mixed in, but there were also two robot masters at the head. A large one colored red, cyan, and yellow with v-shaped torso armor and a lightning bolt motif emblazoned on the chest and another with a soot-black face with blue and green armor. (8)

"Repeat: Surrender the Arks of the Cosmos immediately!" the one with the lightning bolt declared.

"Not a chance!" Storm retorted defiantly before anyone else could issue a response.

"So be it," the soot-faced one intoned before generating several explosive devices that it made to throw in their direction.

"Run for it!" Sonic's cry as the devices left the robot's hand sent Sally tearing off on her Extreme Gear in the general direction of 'anywhere but here'.

Taking down the flame-using robot had been harder than expected, but with plenty of covering fire from Omega shredding the Joes and Mets that kept trying to support the lead robots, and Bass keeping the shark-themed robot occupied, it had been done.

"Eat shit fin-head!" Bass's foul-mouthed yell told Shadow and Rouge how that was currently going.

A clever maneuver had lured the purple robot into the path of the yellow one's electric orbs, and that had rather handily dealt with him. Though even with how slow the yellow robot master's electric orbs moved, the Chaotix and Blues were not having an easy time of dealing with him.

"Akpth!" Rotor sputtered as he was hit with the chest-mounted water blaster of the Freedom Fighter's remaining opponent. But he stood firm and refused to fall and he set his feet on the ground and began to push his walrus bulk back against the onslaught. "Yeah, right!" he taunted, holding a hand in front of his mouth. "You're gonna need more than that to take me out!" (9)

"Then more it shall be!" the robot began increasing the output of water, not noticing the other Freedom Fighters gathering behind it for a counter-assault.

Sally had gotten separated from Sonic and the others when the explosive attack happened, and she was cursing her luck since the same bomb-using robot was now chasing just her.

Well... her and Storm who had also been separated from his team, but who knew if he'd be willing to work with her?

As more bombs detonated around them, the two shot out of the complex and out over a hydroelectric plant attached to the building. Energy fire from a few Joe and Met units that had also managed to keep up flew past and Sally decided that any help was worth a shot.

"Storm, I need you to listen to me!" she called out.

"Why would I do dat, lady?" the muscular avian tried to sneer at her, which was somewhat ruined by the look of fear on his face as another bomb detonated disturbingly close.

"Because it's our best chance of getting out of this alive!"

"Yeah..." Storm hesitated for a moment before agreeing, "okay... What do I gotta do?"

"When I give the signal, brake your Extreme Gear hard and swing your fist around behind you!"

"Got it, lady!"

"NOW!"

Both of the fleeing mobians braked in mid-air and swung around on the side closest to the other. Storm's spinning blow clotheslined the bomb-throwing robot while the single energy blade Sally currently

wore flashed into being and cut deep into the robot's armor opposite Storm. The robot was lifted bodily off of its Extreme Gear as the two tore into the remaining forces. (10)

Jet had been mostly furious after the initial panic wore off, but now he was starting to panic again. They'd taken out the mooks just fine, but the leader? Everything just bounced off of that energy field of his.

Ram him? Bounce off the shield. Use his bashōsen (11)? Bounce off the shield. Gravity bind him so he couldn't dodge? He hadn't been doing that anyway. Gravity dive-bomb him for extra power? He just went bouncing off the walls inside that shield none the worse for wear and came back for more.

And if you actually touched the field yourself? That was one painful shock.

"Jet..." Wave pleaded for an idea he didn't have at the moment.

"I got it!" the fox spoke up. "His shield will repel almost any impact, but a big enough impact will still repel him shield and all anyway!"

"We know that!" Jet sniped. "We tried it already!"

"But not from both sides at once!"

"I get it!" Wave smiled. "We hit him with something big from both sides and he gets crushed in between!"

"Better make it extra big," the echidna agreed, "like the walls."

"Sounds like a plan!" Jet's rival, Sonic, grinned, brandishing the Ark on his wrist. "Ready Jet?"

"Just try to keep up!" Jet returned the expression as he gathered gravity power in his own Ark and focused on using it against the persistent robot. The two gravity fields formed and large metal plates

were pulled from the walls as they all rocketed forward, the robot close behind. With a nod to each other as they ground off of a pair of metal platings perfectly positioned, they concentrated and when the robot came between those plates, they slammed them together, crushing both shield and robot alike.

"What is that infernal racket?" the man furiously pounding away at the master terminal fumed. "Would one of you put a stop to that already?!"

Two other figures in the room glanced at each other while yet another remained stoically unmoved by everything. After a short silent exchange, the one in blue sighed to the one in yellow. "I'll do it..."

Moving towards the door, the figure in blue opened it and immediately reacted to what was behind it. His arms shot out to grab two figures coming in at a fast pace right off of the Extreme Gear they were riding before their identities had properly registered. Blinking, the figure took in the blue form restrained with one hand and the green form restrained by the other.

"Hey Sonic, hey Jet, what are you doing here?"

"Release Jet immediately!" the voice of Wave yelled out as she, Tails, and Knuckles came to a halt just outside the room.

"Hey... Rock..." Sonic grinned weakly. "Mind... giving... us... some... air?"

"Oh," Rock blinked as he realized he'd reflexively grabbed both figures by their necks. "Sorry about that."

"No worries," Sonic chuckled after he'd taken a few deep breaths.

"Air!" Jet gasped melodramatically. "Sweet, lovely air!"

"Hey everyone, what's up?"

"Nothing much, Roll," Tails smiled as the others entered the room, Wave moving to make sure Jet really was just hamming it up and not seriously injured.

"Yes," the man seated at a flashing red console snarked as he turned around to glare accusingly at everyone, "nothing but making an *infernal racket* while I'm trying to work!"

"You're..." Jet blinked as he took in the seated figure. There was only one thing he could really think about the current situation. *'That's... not Eggman...'*

"Dr. Wily," the man grinned with total confidence and just a hint of menace, "owner of MeteoTech Security Systems and the most brilliant genius in the world." (12)

"That's odd..." Rouge muttered as she listened to a report from her earwig while a short distance away Bass stood over the remains of the shark-themed robot. "Reports say that the robot masters that were rampaging have all been defeated... but the other robots aren't stopping..."

"Then we stop them with force," Omega intoned, "preferably excessive."

"Of course," Shadow nodded absently, "but if the robot masters aren't controlling the rest of them, then who is?"

"The mother computer which governs all of MeteoTech's security forces is known as the Concordance Report Organizer for Response Quantification," (13) Wily explained to the rest of the room, "or CRORQ for short. It typically rests in the facility I built in the Crimson Crater and is powered by a most intriguing artifact I discovered there. A ring made of a material that does not naturally exist on this

planet in anywhere near sufficient quantities to fabricate such a device. It exudes a unique magnetic field and can convert raw mass energy directly into more potent forms."

"Tell them how you planned to use it to command an invasion much like the one happening now," a measured voice from off to the side spoke. A green-armored robot that looked much like the white ones that had been chasing everyone. Right down to the single red optic, but with an added shield in addition to a yellow and black Extreme Gear with a red cross on it.

Wave and Jet were immediately on guard when they saw him.

"Easy," Rock made a placating gesture. "That's Joe, he's with us."

"I am with myself," the robot named 'Joe' corrected. "I am making sure the doctor is behaving."

"Bah!" Wily scoffed. "It'll take more than a renegade unit to control me!"

"How about a knuckle sandwich?" Knuckles cracked his namesake a bit too eagerly. "Will that help?"

Wily stared into the echidna's eyes for several moments before sighing heavily and turning back to the console, calling up images and diagrams. "As much as I would love to take credit for this and order the world to bow to me, I have unfortunately lost control of CRORQ and by extension the entirety of MeteoTech's global forces. It happened last night when a meteor containing another of those unique alien artifacts struck the premises, and I've been unable to reestablish control. All I've been able to determine is that they're seeking out similar objects."

"They're drawn to one another," Jet cut in. "They aren't just some rocks. They're spoken of in Babylon clan legend as the Arks of the Cosmos!"

"Interesting..." Wily stroked his chin. "That explains a great deal that I've been wondering about them..." The mad scientist let that trail off before suddenly bursting into movement as he yanked open a drawer. "In any case, I think I may have something for you. Ah, here they are!"

The room blinked as Wily pulled out a pair of rings roughly the size of the Arks Sonic and Jet wore on their wrists.

"Are those...?" Tails began hesitantly.

"I call them Gravity Rings," Wily smirked. "While full analysis of the 'Ark' in my possession may be a ways off still, I was able to replicate some of the device's basic abilities. Such as the ones I've seen you using on the security monitors as you tore my facility apart. I've only been able to construct two so far, but they should be of use to you nonetheless."

With that, Wily tossed the two devices to Rock and Roll, who blinked at them for a few seconds. "Um..."

"Oh, don't look so shocked," Wily humphed. "How can I conquer the world if my own forces are running rampant under something else's direction? You can use your copy chips and then hand those things out to whoever you think can use them properly. Go do your thing. Take care of this so we can get back to business as usual." (14)

The robot siblings blinked and looked at each other for a moment before shrugging and doing exactly that. When they were done, they each turned to another in the room.

"Here," Roll said as she handed hers to Wave. "It's based on something your ancestors wrote about after all."

"Thanks..." Wave said as she took it, not entirely sure what to make of the gesture.

"Joe?" Rock offered his to the green robot, who simply stared back at him blankly for several seconds. "Don't worry. I did a thorough malware scan. There's no hidden surprises if you use it."

"...Very well," the renegade Joe unit agreed at last. "I downloaded Wily's plans to upgrade the Extreme Joe series with this technology," he continued, ignoring the doctor's surprised sputtering. "With a working prototype, I should be able to finish the model conversion upgrade for independent usage in a few hours. I shall pass it on after the process has finished."

"Um..." Rock sweatdropped. "I kind of meant it as a gesture of friendship..."

"Noted. Irrelevant, but noted." (15)

"Hey Sal!" Sonic greeted. "You're just in time! We were about to head over to the Gigan Rocks!"

Sure, they technically didn't need to, but Rock and Roll hadn't done this dance a gazillion times like they had, and they wanted to have a look around. That Joe guy too (who Rock apparently still hadn't confirmed if he was looping or not), but he was rather conspicuously staying several yards away from everyone else.

"What happened to your Ark, Aunt Sally?" Tails asked as he noticed that the princess had traded the object out and restored her second energy-blade generating bracelet.

"I gave it to Storm," Sally shrugged like it was no big deal. "It is an ancient Babylonian artifact after all, and he helped me deal with my pursuers. I'll kind of miss what it let me do though..."

"Sally," NICOLE interrupted, "I have just received a data package from the Lights that I can use to upgrade your bracelets to perform the personal gravity powers of the Arks in the time it will take us to travel to the Gigan Rocks."

Sally blinked at that. "Really?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes," NICOLE confirmed, "and I should be able to make this a standard ability for your chosen armaments in the future." (16)

"Boss?" Storm asked as Jet failed to react to him placing an Ark on his desk.

"Good job Storm," Jet replied absently. It wasn't that he wasn't glad to get his hands on another Ark of the Cosmos, but that he was still trying to wrap his mind around the differences this... 'Fused Loop' had caused. The 'robot masters' were one thing, but that Wily guy... that had thrown him off-balance. As if one madman with a robot army bent on taking over the world wasn't enough, apparently this time there were *two* of them!

And to make matters more complicated, Storm had only brought back one Ark of the Cosmos instead of two. That was the one stolen from the museum, Jet's was from the Gigan Rocks, Sonic still had his, and the master unit should still be powering this... CRORQ computer of Wily's that had replaced Eggman's mother computer. So...

Where was the fifth and final one? The one that had apparently triggered the robot rampage in the first place?

"Uh, boss?" Storm sounded wary. That wasn't good.

A quick check showed that the Ark he'd brought was still on Jet's desk, causing the leader of the Babylon Rogues to blink. This was usually when Eggman tried to sneak in and steal them, and he'd once again been distracted enough to allow it. In puzzlement, Jet looked to Storm who was pointing at something behind Jet. But the only thing there was the window...

"Jet, get down!" Wave yelled as she ran to tackle Jet just as he spotted the green and purple aquatic robot (with a yellow mohawk?)

hovering on an Extreme Gear outside the window just as it leveled a trident in his direction. A trident that had the last Ark of the Cosmos attached to the staff. (17)

And then the world was drowned out as his ears exploded from noise. As did the windows a part of his mind noted as he felt broken glass shower around him.

He blinked, but his eyes refused to focus and the room swam in a way that made him hesitant to stand up. Off to the side, he could see that Wave and Storm were similarly incapacitated. The robot however, calmly dismounted its Extreme Gear and strode on its flipper-feet to collect the Ark from Jet's desk and attach it to the staff of its trident. Then it bent over to take Jet's from his wrist.

"No..." Jet weakly tried to protest, before his head pounded so hard at the attempted defensive movement that he could only grimace as his own Ark was removed and added to the other two on the staff of the robot's trident.

"I have three of the Arks, my master," the robot spoke to someone not there. "Moving to retrieve the final one. Sonic Man out."

'Sonic Man...?' Jet thought with decreasing wooziness as the robot re-mounted its Extreme Gear and took off.

"Jet... orders?" Wave asked, just now getting to her knees.

"Full speed... ahead," Jet growled as he began to feel more steady by the moment. "Don't let him get away!"

"The divine wings, the straddler of stars loss it's plumes to the dark and fall to the ground. The plumes become as stars, returning to this land. We , the children of Babylon seal one star here and the other within the great scar, formed in heaven's fall until the time of the divine's wings rising."

That had been about as far as Knuckles got through the familiar translation before a massive gravity field had rendered everyone weightless and flung all but Sonic back into the catacombs they'd emerged from in the first place.

Sonic had immediately concentrated on breaking free of the gravity field using the Ark on his wrist, noting that it was taking much more effort than he'd expected, when the burst of sound hit and he'd lost all sense of balance. Heck, he barely had enough coherent thought left from the blindside to recognize the swim-finned robot that calmly approached to take the Ark on his wrist and add it to the three on his trident. (18)

Sonic Man. Even if the sound-using robot wasn't speed-themed or in the shape of a hedgehog, the very fact that he had Sonic's name had ensured that the blue blur would never forget him. Actually, the fact that the name was the *only* thing they shared (not to mention that much was apparently complete coincidence) had just served to cheese Sonic off even more. He had rivals who contrasted him in appearance, philosophy, ability, attitude, and everything else. The *last* thing he needed was someone who was a contrast in how his *name* was interpreted!

But it would have to wait a bit. Sonic Man had left just as the others were getting back, and from the pace the Babylon Rogues' blimp was setting as it came into view heading in the same direction as Sonic Man, it looked like Sonic might just have to take a number.

"Took you long enough," Jet glared as Sonic and the others finally made it to the Crimson Crater and took in the sprawling crater-filling complex before them. In the center, a massive tower jutted out like an antenna ending in an equally massive skull shape.

"Where is he?" Sonic sent his own glare right back. He wasn't really angry with Jet anymore than Jet was really angry with him. They were both angry at the same individual.

"Right here," a hologram of Sonic Man was projected a short ways away. "My master has bid me invite you into his sanctum so that you may witness the power he shall shortly possess in person. You may, of course, try to stop me from delivering the Arks to my master in the Crimson Skull Tower, but you will fail."

"Cocky, aren't you?" Roll shot at the hologram.

"Believe what you will," Sonic Man retorted. "Your pathetic replicas of the Arks cannot hope to overcome the real things I carry."

"Why that smug little...!" Wave fumed as the transmission cut out before taking off the Gravity Ring she wore and shoving it into Jet's hands. "I expect you to turn him into a pile of scrap!"

"Don't worry," Jet growled as he put the Gravity Ring on his wrist.

"Sonic," the renegade Joe unit removed the one he was wearing and tossed it to the hedgehog.

"Um... thanks?" the blue blur blinked, but put it on anyway.

"I have finished full system integration and you are obviously the best choice to wield it after Jet."

"I have also finished upgrading your own weapons, Sally," NICOLE chimed.

"As I was saying," Jet cut back in. "We all want the same thing. That 'Sonic Man' robot. First one to catch him gets first crack, deal?"

Sonic, Rock, and their friends looked at each other, before nodding in agreement.

Joe reflected that Sonic Man had not been giving idle boasts when he said they could not catch him. No matter how fast any of them raced through the complex or how skilled those who had the gravity-

manipulating technology used it, they simply could not catch up to him. If they got close, he used the four Arks on his trident to halt projectiles and burst forth faster than even a Gravity Dive could follow.

Of course he was trailing all of the others, so he hadn't gotten his shot in yet. But as they all approached the peak of the Crimson Skull Tower and the command room within, he suspected he might get his chance.

Sonic Man arrived first and halted before the massive mainframe in the chamber before turning around to meet the charge of the others. As Sonic and Jet arrived first, the Arks on his trident flared and the two leaders were rendered immobile and weightless. And as they tried to use their Gravity Rings to break free, it seemed that they just weren't powerful enough to counteract the power of four Arks. As they struggled, the others shot in and got caught in the same field almost instantly, leaving Joe the only one uncaught. Even the shots Mega Man and Mega Woman took halted in midair moments after leaving the barrels to float as weightless as anything else in the field except Sonic Man himself.

Which was one of the reasons why he had wanted the specs on the gravity upgrades to the Extreme Joes instead of just the Gravity Ring. One of the things it contained was a special 'friendly unit' frequency which created an exclusion effect in any gravity field a Wily-made robot created with the Arks or derived technology.

An exclusion effect he intended to put to full use as he held his shield in front of him like it was the point of a spear and aimed straight for Sonic Man's center of mass.

The robot master didn't even have time to register Joe cutting through the gravity field like it didn't exist before he collided head on and the two went tumbling to the floor of the chamber, along with everyone else (the two buster shots suddenly flying to impact the walls instead). Sonic Man appeared to recover first and shoved Joe

off of him before leveling a blast of sound energy at the renegade unit that blew him into a wall.

"It is useless!" the robot master declared as he powered up the Arks of the Cosmos again before any more attacks could be made. "I am a robot master, you are merely–"

"Grenade," Joe interrupted, pointing to Sonic Man's torso. The robot master looked down to see the grenade Joe had hooked onto his armor right before it exploded. And if that hadn't been enough, the barrage the rest unleashed in the opening provided took care of it.

"IMPRESSIVE."

"Heh, I was, wasn't I–" Jet started to brag before cutting himself off. "Who said that?"

"Um..." Storm's eyes widened and he pointed at the large mainframe in the center of the room. "B-b-boss... That thing is *lookin'* at us..."

Indeed the mainframe had opened a large screen that now displayed a pair of giant red circles that gave the impression of being eyes and a green soundline used to display frequency measurement took the position of a mouth.

"MOST IMPRESSIVE," the green line wavered and distorted with the voice, matching the proper display for each vocal frequency in real-time. "YOUR POWER AND SKILL HAS NOT BEEN EXAGGERATED."

"What... is... that...?" Wave's eyes widened as she tried to process this new development.

"I AM CRORQ," the voice declared as the struts holding the mainframe up began to move and position themselves to lift the entire mainframe off of the floor. The backwards knee-bend and the hand-splay of the 'feet' ended up giving the whole thing the appearance of some giant mechanical frog. As they all watched, the

four Arks that had been on Sonic Man's trident removed themselves and floated up around CRORQ before slotting themselves into alcoves on its frame. "HOLDER OF THE ARKS OF THE COSMOS, NEW MASTER OF BABYLON, GREATEST CREATION OF DR. WILY, AVATAR OF THE LIGHTLESS BLACK, AND SOON RULER OF THE UNIVERSE." (19)

"I have to wonder what Dr. Wily is thinking," Shade noted as she cut down yet another of the endless tide of white Joe-model robots. Around her the Chaotix were doing their best to fight off the invasion, but even with the most dangerous robots down, it seemed that the numbers were only increasing with every robot destroyed.

"It's not him," Blues calmly stated as he continued shooting. "I've had a monitoring program keeping tabs on him for a while and he's been making too many attempts to regain control to actually be behind this."

"Then..."

"It's not Eggman either."

"But who else can even do something like this?"

"I'm a bit too occupied to compile a list right now..."

Wave had just figured out what was scaring her about this situation.

"Ruler of the universe?" Jet scoffed. "Don't make me laugh!"

"I AM NOT PROGRAMMED FOR HUMOR," CRORQ stated without emotion. "I AM THE CONCORDANCE REPORT ORGANIZER FOR RESPONSE QUANTIFICATION CREATED BY DR. ALBERT W. WILY. MY FUNCTION IS TO ANALYZE POTENTIAL THREATS AND DETERMINE THE OPTIMAL METHODS OF DEALING WITH THEM. MY PRIMARY DIRECTIVE IS TO SEE THAT MY CREATOR

IS RIGHTFULLY RECOGNIZED AS THE GREATEST GENIUS EVER BORN."

"So Wily is behind this!" Sonic accused. "I knew it!"

Arrayed against him were the Babylon Rogues, Sonic and his friends, as well as the global hero duo of Mega Man and Mega Woman.

"NEGATIVE," the massive walking mainframe replied. "AFTER EXTENSIVE ANALYSIS I DETERMINED THAT THE GREATEST HINDRANCE TO MY CREATOR'S BRILLIANCE WAS HIS PRIDE. AS SUCH, I HAVE TAKEN CONTROL AND REMOVED THAT VARIABLE FROM THE EQUATION. DR. WILY'S DIRECT INFLUENCE IS NO LONGER REQUIRED FOR ME TO FULFILL MY PRIMARY DIRECTIVE."

"You might want to recalculate," Mega Woman stepped forward, brandishing her combat broom threateningly. "The robot masters under your command have all fallen and you have no other defenses to stop us."

All of whom were armed, powerful, skilled, and determined to oppose the mad computer.

"I DO NOT REQUIRE THESE THINGS. I NOW POSSESS ALL FIVE ARKS OF THE COSMOS AND WITH THEM," CRORQ intoned as a large object floated into view outside the chamber's window, "THE ALIEN SPACECRAFT DESIGNATED BABYLON GARDEN."

"And what are you going to do with it?" Mega Man asked, a calculating look on his face as the walls of the chamber began to retract, opening it to the sky beyond.

And this CRORQ...

"I SHALL INTERFACE WITH BABYLON GARDEN, BECOMING THE LIGHTLESS BLACK THAT POWERS ITS MAIN DRIVE

SYSTEM. A THINKING BLACK HOLE THROUGH WHICH I SHALL TAKE MY CREATOR'S AMBITIONS TO THE FARTHEST REACHES OF SPACE. WHEN MY CONQUEST IS COMPLETE, NONE IN THE UNIVERSE WILL BE ABLE TO DISPUTE WILY'S GENIUS WITH ANY CREDIBILITY."

"You must know that we'll stop you," Mega Man declared. "Using a black hole drive within a habited atmosphere would be catastrophic!"

...wasn't the least bit concerned. Wave could tell now that it thought each powerful individual arrayed against it to be of no consequence. (20)

"THE LOSS OF LIFE, INCLUDING THE LIKELY DEATH OF MY CREATOR, IS A NECESSARY COST TO COMPLETE MY PRIME DIRECTIVE AND THE ODDS OF YOU ATTEMPTING TO PREVENT THIS EVENT ARE INDEED 100%," CRORQ admitted. "BUT I AM THE GREATEST SUPERCOMPUTER EVER ASSEMBLED. I CAN REACT IN AN INSTANT AS NECESSARY OR WAIT FOR AN ETERNITY AS NEEDED. SINCE MY CONSTRUCTION I HAVE ANALYZED THE ABILITIES OF EVERY COMBATANT OF CONSEQUENCE TO CROSS THIS WORLD'S PATH AS WELL AS CALCULATING THE CAPACITY OF THE GRAVITY DRIVE THE ARKS OF THE COSMOS COMPRISE. WITH THE GLOBAL DISPERSION OF FORCES, I HAVE OCCUPIED MOST OF THE WORLD'S DEFENDERS. WITH THE SWIFTNESS OF THE ATTACK THAT I LAUNCHED THE MOMENT THE LAST OF THE ARKS FELL TO THE SURFACE, I HAVE PREVENTED THE ASSEMBLY OF THE CHAOS EMERALDS. WITHOUT THEM AT THIS JUNCTURE, THE ODDS OF YOU DEFEATING ME ARE CALCULATED AT 0%. YOU ARE NO LONGER ANY THREAT."

A burst of sound struck CRORQ in the side and everyone looked over to where Joe held the destroyed Sonic Man's discarded trident. "These individuals do the impossible all the time. Your argument is invalid."

"CORRECTION:" CRORQ intoned as it blasted the trident to scrap. "ANYTHING DONE CANNOT BE IMPOSSIBLE. THEREFORE THEY HAVE MERELY ACCOMPLISHED THE IMPROBABLE. I ESTIMATE SEVEN MINUTES FROM THE TIME I TELEPORT TO INTERFACE WITH BABYLON GARDEN'S SYSTEMS AND FULLY CHARGE THE GRAVITY DRIVE WITHIN. I ALSO ESTIMATE A TRAVEL TIME USING EXTREME GEAR TO COMPRISE NO LESS THAN FOUR MINUTES."

Five black orbs emerged from CRORQ to land in front of it and resolve themselves into five black figures on their own Extreme Gear. Four rode upon boards, black-bodied clones of Sonic, Jet, Sally, and Joe. The fifth was a massive form on a bike-type Gear possessing thick arms and legs as well as a single eye in the middle of what would normally be the torso, showing it to be a member of the Devil series. CRORQ himself began to hum as he activated a site-to-site teleport and finished his analysis.

"CONCLUSION: THE BLACK TROOP SCENARIO IS SUFFICIENT TO DELAY YOU UNTIL COMPLETION IS INEVITABLE." (21)

"Oh, no..." Wily's eyes widened as he watched the energy readings of the area near his Crimson Skull Tower go haywire.

It was an impressive sight. As a bright light shone from Babylon Garden, glowing brighter and brighter as the floating structure's ancient stone walls began to crumble. As the light reached truly blinding levels, a massive pulse of energy was unleashed, the shockwave buffeting everything in its path and shattering half of the steel complex that filled the Crimson Crater.

And then all of the debris halted in midair to float weightlessly. The light died down to reveal the gleaming metal spaceship that had been at the heart of the ancient stone structure right before a ring of light emerged around it to complement the light from its core and the shockwave from before seemed to *reverse* as everything began to

be sucked towards the craft with such force that a massive storm was created from the sheer disruption.

But those who had a front row seat to the event could not take the time to properly appreciate the sight. They had to put a stop to the disaster that had been set in motion before it reached its final conclusion.

The fact that the opponents that had been left behind to stall them had gravity powers themselves rather complicated things though.

"We'll handle the Black Devil! You all focus on getting past the rest of the Black Troop and stopping CRORQ!"

Rock and Roll might have regretted the decision to take on the largest and most powerful of the Black Troop, but they had long experience with the Devil series and the myriad of variations from both the baseline and that the Loops sometimes brought forth.

The hardest part was getting a clear shot at the thing's eye while they did their best to ride the immense turbulence that their opponent seemed to power through with ease.

Then they saw something that might turn the engagement their way. A metal pole caught up in the high-force winds.

"Rock!" Roll called out to her brother, both out loud and over their communications channel.

"I see it!" Rock yelled back as they both prepared the Gravity Ring weapon they had copied.

They boosted forward and slammed their Gears into the object to orient it in the direction they wanted, and when the Black Devil tried to defend with the gravity field power CRORQ had granted the Black Troop, they cancelled it out using their own and the pole slammed right through the Black Devil's eye without a problem.

The following lightning strike hadn't been planned, but neither Rock or Roll were about to complain.

"I can handle Black Joe on my own."

As he was tossed around the air trying to race towards the true threat while his pitch-black double did his best to waylay him, Joe wondered if that had been a true claim or a sign of hubris.

Black Joe was every bit his equal on an Extreme Gear, and his command over the gravity fields was much more natural than Joe's own.

'Of course it is,' Joe reminded himself as he took in his opponent's lack of a shield. *'He's based on the Extreme Joe line.'*

Joe allowed himself to fall back and once he was far enough back that Black Joe turned his attention away, he brought up his targeting system and took aim.

'I'm a sniper model,' he reaffirmed as he calculated the chaotic weather effects and adjusted his aim accordingly before taking the shot. (22)

"As if I didn't have enough evil doppelgangers already..."

Yet another copy of him or not, Sonic was forced to admit that 'Black Sonic' was good on an Extreme Gear. Very good. Possibly even as good as he was.

'Heck,' Sonic admitted silently as he and 'Black Sonic' pushed gravity fields against each other, *'if I was doing this alone, I might actually have a bit of a problem.'*

But then, he wasn't doing this alone. And he'd teamed up with the one guy who knew all his moves inside and out. 'Black Sonic' was so

focused on keeping the blue blur busy that he never saw the tail hammer hit him from behind.

"I do not have time for this..."

But then, that was the whole point, wasn't it? That's what Sally reminded herself of as she and Knuckles took on 'Black Acorn' as the echidna had called Sally's double. The whole purpose of the Black Troop was to delay all of them so that they didn't have enough time left to stop CRORQ.

"Knuckles, keep her off of me for a second!" she yelled.

"As you wish, princess!" the guardian of the floating island nodded as he rushed between the two and began matching spiked fist to shadowy energy blade.

"NICOLE, I think it's time to cheat a bit," Sally narrowed her eyes.

"In what way, Sally?" her soul-bound companion asked.

"Let's turn this from two-on-one to three-on-one," Sally smirked.

"Of course," NICOLE agreed right before a female lynx mobian in a black and purple martial arts dress, riding an Extreme Gear and wielding a bo staff, manifested and shot towards 'Black Acorn'.

Sally's doppelganger seemed surprised by this new development as the hasty defense she mounted was easily broken by NICOLE's combat prowess. (23)

"You think you can copy me?! Time to show you how wrong you are!"

Jet was torn on his feelings regarding 'Black Jet'. On the one hand, facing a fake *him* rankled the hawk on several levels. On the other

hand, it meant that the best thing his foe could think to throw at Jet was essentially Jet himself, which was kind of flattering in a creepy way.

Of course, the fact that 'Black Jet' was matching him swing for swing of his bashōsen was more immediately annoying.

"Grrr..." Jet growled at another fruitless exchange of blows before focusing on the power of the Gravity Ring he still wore. "Let's see how you handle this!"

The gravity field burst out, only to be countered by one from 'Black Jet' himself. As the two struggled, Jet had to admit that this doppelganger was almost his equal. If he'd had the time, he would have loved to finish this match-up one-on-one, but he didn't. Besides...

"Wave! Storm!" he commanded. "Now!"

'Black Jet' jerked as Wave side-swiped him in the back, right before Storm rushed in with a haymaker that blew 'Black Jet' off of his board and into one of the torrential air currents that now howled around Babylon Garden.

...only duplicating *one* member of the Babylon Rogues was such a glaring mistake that it begged to be taken advantage of.

"At this rate..." Wily paled as he finished checking the figures, "by the time I can craft a device to correct this anomaly, enough of the planet will be sucked into the forming black hole to make sustained habitation impossible."

"YOU HAVE ARRIVED SOONER THAN I PREDICTED," the even more massive form of CRORQ intoned. Its frame had grown by an order of magnitude and become more like the surrounding machinery. In between its feet was held a massive pulsating black

hole that caused the drive chamber to warp and twist in normally impossible ways, and around which orbited the five Arks of the Cosmos. The maintenance pathways had been twisted into a mobius strip of all things which was where the racers landed as they faced down the monstrosity. **"IT IS NO MATTER. I HAVE BONDED WITH BABYLON'S DRIVE CORE. THE GRAVITY DRIVE WILL REACH FULL CHARGE IN ROUGHLY TWO MINUTES. YOU CANNOT STOP IT."**

"Watch us!" several voices yelled as they all took off in pursuit of the mad machine.

"FUTILE," CRORQ intoned as it floated away along the track at a pace equal to any of the racers, maintaining a constant distance as it opened fire with energy blasts. **"MY PRIME DIRECTIVE SHALL BE MET. THIS PLANET'S END IS MERELY ACCEPTABLE COLLATERAL DAMAGE IN THAT PURSUIT."**

The response was return fire from those racers capable of it as they did their best to prove him wrong.

"YOU SHALL FAIL," CRORQ declared as it performed a short-range teleport to the end of a very long stretch of the twisted unnatural track and the orbiting Arks of the Cosmos sped up as they prepared to charge up a gravity field.

"Hey, Jet!" Sonic called out to his rival. "Remember what I said I wanted to try?"

"You never told me!" Jet yelled back. "You just said to race for it!"

"Just follow my lead and be ready to do something crazy!"

"PREPARE TO BECOME ONE WITH THE LIGHTLESS BLACK!"

The gravity field intensified and all of the racers found themselves in an involuntary Gravity Dive as pieces of the track ripped free of the

twisted mass they were a part of and they all rocketed towards the black hole CRORQ held.

"I must be insane to listen to you!" Jet yelled as he, Sonic, and the other racers began to grind off of the massive pieces of track that threatened to dash them long before they reached their foe while they continued to accelerate ever faster in a barely-controlled freefall.

"Trust me!" Sonic yelled back as he began to use his Gravity Ring. Except Jet could feel that he wasn't forming a gravity field, as if that would be of any use against CRORQ's, Sonic was instead using the gravity energy to reach out to the Arks of the Cosmos orbiting the black hole CRORQ was trying to pull them all into.

Jet focused as the sight of their mutual foe grew ever larger and reached through the same sympathetic connection Sonic had and brushed his focus against the Arks once more, and was surprised that they responded.

As they got closer, all of the racers ground off one last obstacle to change their trajectory from the black hole to CRORQ's body, Sonic and Jet out in front. Right before they hit, they flared the connection to the Arks in unison and the tableau held for a few seconds as the others struck CRORQ's metal frame with all of their momentum.

"WHAT ARE YOU ATTEMPTING?" CRORQ questioned as the force of the impacts flung him in one direction while Sonic and Jet pulled the Arks in the other. With a snap of energy, CRORQ and the Arks parted ways, the mad supercomputer and his black hole flying down the track while the five Arks of the Comsos now orbited Sonic and Jet. **"MY SINGULARITY IS NOW SELF-SUSTAINING. EVEN THE ARKS OF THE COSMOS CANNOT SAVE YOU AT THIS JUNCTURE."**

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" Sonic grinned and Jet felt him begin to draw the combined power of the Arks into himself and did the

same in confusion. "But I've learned in my adventures is that it's not just the Chaos Emeralds which can transform someone."

Jet didn't have time to process that before his body was overtaken by a rush of power unlike anything he'd ever felt. It surged through every pore, every feather, every cell of his being until Jet could feel nothing but the power and see nothing but a blinding light.

"IMPOSSIBLE."

"No, you said it yourself: Merely improbable."

A moment, or an eternity?, later Jet blinked to see the sight of his own arms. They weren't green like usual. Instead, they were pitch black with spots of light. Like the vastness of space visible in the night sky. (24)

"Looking good Space Jet," he heard the voice next to him. Turning, he saw the figure of Sonic, also black with points of light.

"Space Jet, huh?" he snorted in reflex. **"What does that make you? Cosmic Sonic?"**

Sonic seemed to think about that for a moment. **"I like it,"** the hedgehog grinned before jerking a thumb in the direction of their mutual foe. **"But we've still got a computer to 'crorq' as it were."**

"RECALCULATION COMPLETE:" CRORQ replied. **"ADVERSARIES IN POSSESSION OF UNKNOWN ABILITIES. ODDS OF SUCCESS NO LONGER CERTAIN. TIME TO FULL DRIVE CHARGE: ONE MINUTE. COME. FACE ME IF YOU CAN."**

"Be careful what you wish for!" Space Jet yelled as he and Cosmic Sonic engaged Gravity Dives as easily as flexing a muscle.

As they shot forward, the Arks of the Cosmos trailing behind them, CRORQ began to retreat as fast as it could even as it unleashed

energy blasts and threw masses of metal ripped from the greater structure at them.

"Listen, Space Jet!" Cosmic Sonic yelled as he dodged and weaved. **"We don't have enough time to do this delicately! We have to somehow collapse the black hole without making the situation wor–"**

Cosmic Sonic was cut off as the distraction of talking to Space Jet prevented him from seeing the incoming meteor in time to dodge and he was knocked behind.

Space Jet was in such shock that he almost took an energy blast and went the same way. Gulping, the reality of the situation sunk in past the rush of power. The fate of the world... was on his shoulders. But... he wasn't any sort of hero! He was a pirate! A racer! Not some kind of savior!

"You can do it boss!"

"You have to, Jet!"

Jet didn't dare let the voices of his only friends distract him from the onslaught. But they were right. He had to do this. There wasn't anyone else left who could.

Focusing intently on what he wanted to do, he called the Arks to himself and felt each one snap around a limb. One on each wrist, another on each ankle, and the master unit over his neck. With a direct interface, he just might be able to control his immense power to do this just right.

He dodged around more obstacles as he closed in on his foe as he gathered power into his hands and aimed, not for the mechanical body, but for the black hole it carried beneath it.

"AND THUS IS YOUR DEFEAT ACHIEVED."

Jet ignored the words and thrust his hand forward, throwing the power within himself out to grasp the black hole as he yelled out his intentions.

"GRAVITY CONTROL!"

He felt his power wrestle with the ceaseless hunger of his target and begin to slow the growing power to a crawl.

"WHAT... WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"I'm..." Jet grunted out as the black hole's growth stopped and began to reverse, **"I'm stopping this... *I* am the master of Babylon and I *do not permit this!* "**

With an outward rush of wind, the black hole suddenly ceased to exist and Jet felt the immense power leave him as he began to fall.

Dr. Wily blinked as the gravitational anomaly abruptly vanished. "I suppose as aggravating as Thomas's creations and their friends can be, they *do* have their uses."

Jet would have liked to say he landed on his feet. Unfortunately, the power-down had left him so woozy that he couldn't have managed that if he'd been wearing shoes made of concrete. (25)

"Gotcha boss!" Storm declared as he caught the leader of the Babylon Rogues in his arms.

"I AM NOT DEFEATED," the voice of CRORQ declared as the metal walkway shuddered from the impact of its landing. "WITHOUT THE POWER GRANTED BY THE ARKS, MY ARMAMENTS ARE SUPERIOR TO YOURS."

"You might want to recalculate!" came the yell of NICOLE's solid-hologram lynx form as she charged the still immense supercomputer

on a similarly manufactured Extreme Gear, the forms of Sally, Tails, and Knuckles right behind her. (26)

Sonic landed a little unsteadily next to the Babylon Rogues. "You might want to help them. I'll make sure Jet doesn't get hurt."

"You protect me?" Jet's scoff was kind of ruined by the fact that he was disoriented enough that he couldn't quite look his rival in the eye. "You can't evennnnnggh..."

"Jet?/Boss?" the concerned voices of Wave and Storm centered him again.

"Go..." he ordered with all the strength he could muster. "Make that hunk of scrap metal pay for defiling our homeland."

"Gotcha boss," Storm saluted as both his and Wave's expressions hardened before they took off to join the fray.

"YOUR EFFORTS ARE FUTILE," CRORQ intoned as it continued to unleash blasts of energy on its attackers. The blows of Tails, Knuckles, Wave, Storm, and Sally were doing damage aplenty, but given the size of their opponent it just wasn't adding up fast enough. But the one the mad supercomputer seemed focused on was NICOLE. "YOUR MIGHTIEST POWER IS SPENT. YOUR MOST SKILLED COMBATANTS IMPOTENT. AND MY CREATOR'S GREATEST FOES HAVE FLED THE FIELD OF BATTLE. THE SIX OF YOU CANNOT DEFEAT ME. AS A FELLOW COMPUTER YOU MUST REALIZE MY CALCULATIONS ARE CORRECT."

"The numbers add up," NICOLE admitted as she batted one of CRORQ's energy blasts back at the mad machine, a low roar growing louder as she spoke, "but unlike you I have realized the world is more than numbers and figures. Power and weaponry. It is also beauty, love, friendship, trust, freedom, and faith. And for these things, I would fight against the most hopeless of odds. I shall never retreat, and if you understood these things, you would know that the children of Light never would either."

The background roar had grown almost deafening now.

"AH," CRORQ stated. "AMBUSH TAC–"

WHAM *CRASH* *CRUNCH* went three high-velocity objects as they slammed headlong into CRORQ's frame with enough force to knock the massive supercomputer over. Around Mega Man and Mega Woman, glowing forcefields dissipated from the impact while Joe had his feet planted on the back of the shield he'd led with. The mad supercomputer's body hit the floor with a boom and the three robots dismounted to land next to their allies.

"IM*ksch*PRESSIVE," CRORQ sparked from where it lay. "I HAVE *sk-k-krk* BEEN DEFEATED. ONE RE-E-ECOURSE REMAINS. IN*bzt*IATE SELF-DESTRU*k-k-k*T. *brrz-z-zt* ER-R-RO-OR: SELF DESTRUCT O-O-O-OFFLINE."

"Oh," NICOLE smiled at her downed opponent. "I took the liberty of hacking your system while we fought and disabled it."

"I-I-I*krsch* S-S-SEE," CRORQ intoned. "SYST*bzzrtsch* FAILURE IM-M-MINENT. THE L-L-L-LOS-S-S-S-S IS MIIIIIIIIIINNNnnnnnnnnneeeeee...*"

Wily sighed as he saw the signal of his supercomputer terminate. Ah, well. CRORQ and MeteoTech might have flopped, but there were always other plans.

"Ugh..." Jet moaned as he lay back on a bed in a medical bay that the others had found aboard Babylon Garden.

"Tell me about it..." Sonic groaned nearby. "That's one of the roughest transformations I've been through. Definitely a last-ditch sort of thing. Still, it worked. Welcome to the super club, Jet."

"Wait..." Jet's recovering-but-still-disoriented mind latched onto the undertones of that statement. "That was all to get *me* to transform?"

"Well... kinda," Sonic shrugged weakly. "I've been meaning to try using the Arks to trigger a super mode for a long time now, but it never seemed right to use them unless you came along for the ride. So..." the hedgehog shrugged again. "Anyway, how's your subspace pocket coming along?"

Instead of answering, Jet just stared back at Sonic for several seconds. "You're a real piece of work, you know that?"

"Yep," Sonic grinned contentedly. "Now, about that pocket?"

"Yeah, yeah," Jet rolled his eyes. Of course the two of them were being told to stay put. Wave and that Sally girl had pretty much insisted and they'd somehow convinced Storm that Jet could hurt himself if he left, so the big lug was guarding the only door out with Knuckles (who'd pretty much jumped at the chance to possibly strap Sonic to the bed if he tried to leave). "I can get my Extreme Gear in it now, but not much else. Why?"

"Because Tails is putting together some containment units for the Arks so they don't accidentally create a black hole while they're in there. I asked him to add the Gravity Rings from Wily in for good measure. That way you'll always have the option of becoming Space Jet if you get in over your head."

"You..." Jet wanted to yell that he didn't need charity, but trying to be angry right now just made him dizzy. "You're just... giving them to me?"

"Who's giving what?" Sonic snorted. "They're yours, man. You won 'em fair and square, crossed the finish line, beat the bad guy, and closed a black hole through sheer force of will from what I saw. Me? I got knocked flat on my butt because I wasn't paying attention. Man, Knux is *never* gonna let me forget that..."

Jet smiled to himself as Sonic closed his eyes in a grimace. He had, hadn't he? "Don't get used to it. After all, I'm no hero. I'm Jet the Hawk. Leader of the Babylon Rogues, master of the sky, and the fastest thing alive. And I'm going to prove it all over again at the EX World Grand Prix in a few days." (27)

"Heh. Wouldn't have you any other way."

On the screen, a recording of the inscription from the Gigan Rocks was displayed.

"In the ancient past, the inhabitants of Babylon Garden fell from the stars, the divine wing they rode upon having suffered damage from a force known as the lightless black, and so to save themselves they disengaged their only means of heavenly travel, sending them into orbit, and fell to the surface. But the stars used to power their divine wing were never meant to remain in the heavens forever, and so each time they saw a shooting star, the heirs of Babylon would wish with all their hearts that it was another piece of what they needed to return home."

The image changed to a video of the stone Babylon Garden crumbling to reveal the alien spaceship beneath as the gravity drive engaged and formed a black hole in the core of the device.

"But as it turned out, the lightless black that stranded them on their new planet was caused by the very means of travel used to get there. And so, it was sealed again. This time for good."

The ominous glow and the unnatural storm that had formed around the spacecraft died down, leaving the ancient spaceship floating serenely in the air.

"But the legacy of Babylon lives on!" the image changed to show the mayor of Monopole, Leonardo Dorado, one of the founding members of the new EX Racing League and the organization's official announcer. (28) "For their ancient technology has given rise to the

greatest of all sports! Extreme Gear racing! And once again those who embody the legacy of Babylon, through heritage or spirit, have gathered to find out who among them is the master of the skies and the fastest in the world! Ladies and gentlemen! Are you ready to have your wishes granted? Are you ready for competition so great that its champions have spanned both time and space? Then let's hear it for the teams of the second annual *EX WORLD GRAND PRIX!* "

Sonic grinned as the mayor began announcing the various racing teams. Everyone from before had entered except the Hooligans. Instead Eggman, or at least one of his lieutenants, had sent a trio of robots that could turn into flying wheels. The Chaotix were also competing this time, in two teams of three each. Probably because Vector had heard the words 'prize money'. And there were a few other new faces (including NICOLE who was subbing for Amy on Team Acorn due to the pink hedgehog suffering a broken bone during the mass robot invasion that was still healing). But not Silver or Blaze curiously enough.

'Huh... I wonder what they're up to right now?'

Burning Blaze was rather surprised. The fact that Marine had managed a super transformation from the power of the Sol Emeralds was something she'd seen before, but even so Steam Marine had never before appeared when her hyperactive friend wasn't Awake. (29)

Of course, watching the Chaos Emerald transformation of Super Quint alongside Super Silver was a bit of a surprise, but it had still been somewhat expected. And with four super forms gunning for them, the duo of Doctor Eggman and Eggman Nega; even with their Egg Wizard and a fully charged Jeweled Scepter tapping the incalculable power (well, incalculable from mortal perspective. Blaze was sure that the Admins knew exactly how powerful it really was) that naturally lay between dimensions; really hadn't stood a chance.

"Curse you all!" Dr. Eggman fumed as the giant mecha's systems failed one by one.

"Hahahahaha!" Eggman Nega instead laughed uproariously. "Time to die you fools!"

"Nega...?" Eggman paused in confusion. "What are you doing? No! Not *that* button!"

"PLANET BUSTER LASER... ***FIRE!*** "

"Not a chance, ratbags!" Steam Marine yelled as a massive sphere of power formed around the Jeweled Scepter right before she unleashed a blast of super-heated water that punched a hole through the mecha.

Following up on the blow, Super Quint flew up and used his enormous hand to catch and begin to suppress the destructive energy Eggman Nega had tried to unleash. **"Your mad reign of terror ends here, Nega!"**

A psychokinetic glow sprang up around the rest of the robot as Super Silver held it in place. **"Now Blaze!"**

"Right!" Burning Blaze nodded as she coated herself in sun-hot fire and powered through the core of Egg Wizard like a rocket, causing the mecha to explode. Unfortunately Super Silver and Super Quint didn't look as happy as Steam Marine over the defeat of their foe.

"I sensed the dimensional rift right before I struck," Burning Blaze admitted. **"I take it that the Eggmen have vanished."**

"Yes," Super Quint grit his teeth and clenched his fists. **"Eggman Nega has escaped *again* ."**

Since confirming that his world was no longer under imminent threat of destruction, Wily had been scanning the area around the planet

for any other anomalous readings that might be a result of the event, searching for anything that might prove useful. One particular line of data caught his attention and he grinned widely.

" *This* looks interesting..."

---

1) That's right. Even Unawake Marine is so hyper that she can cause sophisticated sapient AIs to stall.

2) Storm is... not the brightest bulb on the strand. His role is essentially 'dumb muscle', complete with taking offense at others calling him dumb.

3) Shark Man and Torch Man from the Mega Man PC series.

4) The yellow one is Bit Man. The purple one is Blade Man (aka Razor Man to avoid confusion with the one from MM9 that came later). Both are, again, from the Mega Man PC series.

5) The oil can head is Oil Man (aka Grease Man to avoid confusion with the Powered Up robot master of the same name) and the blue one is Wave Man (aka Water Man yadda-yadda MM5 robot master of same name yadda yadda), also from the Mega Man PC series. Sensing a pattern yet?

6) Just because Jet *can* learn the egghead stuff doesn't mean he *likes* it.

7) They all recalled seeing him among the massive army of robot masters from the assault on the Wily Egg in that Loop they helped Rock and his branch get online, but other than that they were drawing a blank.

8) Oh, hey, it's Volt Man and Dyna Man (Mega Man PC series, but you probably already guessed that). Remember them? They showed up at the EX World Grand Prix as part of the security forces.

9) Water weapon against a muscular walrus. Not the most optimal choice there.

10) Does this properly convey how badass the scene looks in my head?

11) A palm-leaf fan type of weapon to the uninitiated and Jet's signature weapon in the Riders series. Not the one from Naruto's universe, despite the common descriptor.

12) I almost had Wily say he was the most brilliant *man* , but realized that he wouldn't limit himself so.

13) Yeah, there's no canon acronym for CRORQ so I made one up.

14) I suspect that even Wily sometimes gets tired of trying to convince others that he's on the up and up when he's clearly not.

15) If Joe's potential Awake status for this Loop is as clear as mud, then I'm doing this right.

16) Sometimes cool Loop powers require endless hours of training, dedication, and/or natural affinity to gain/keep. Other times they just fall straight into your lap.

17) And Sonic Man. The CRORQ numbers from the PC series are all present and accounted for.

18) Even loopers can be blindsided, and robot masters are something you take lightly at your own risk in the first place.

19) +1 Holy Shit Quotient...

20) Sometimes the most terrifying emotional reaction an opponent can have is none at all.

21) The Black Troop are a group of special challengers from Mega Man Battle and Chase. Black Devil, Black Joe, and the third being Black Roadster. I decided to... play around with the roster a bit.

22) Boom! Headshot!

23) Yeah, NICOLE can do this. Her holographic Lynx form can be tailored to look any age and wear pretty much any outfit (though she prefers black and purple) and can indeed become solid light to kick ass with martial arts prowess few (in the Sonic baseline) can match. That's in *addition* to her capacity as a pocket-sized supercomputer.

24) Yeah. Jet has a super mode fueled by the Arks of the Cosmos. I totally went there.

25) Though this one is not without its drawbacks. Suffice to say that the Arks were *not* meant to be used in this manner.

26) Because, damnit, NICOLE deserves a moment to shine on her own merits!

27) Jet's may not quite be a bad guy, but he's far from being a good guy. And he prefers it that way.

28) For a character I decided to throw into the mix on a whim, I've gotten some surprising mileage out of Mayor Dorado. I guess certain things just *work* .

29) Steam Marine as Marine's Sol Emerald super mode. Because why not?

30) *Looks at closing line* Oh, that's not ominous at *all* ... [/sarcasm]

Mega Loops X

Mega Loops X

Author's Note: Someone commented last chapter about Jet's bashōsen being excessive since it's at the top of Narutoverse power levels. Let's get one thing straight right now: Jet's bashōsen is not the Narutoverse bashōsen. His weapon is the green feather-war fan that he canonically uses in the Sonic Riders games. One is not necessarily equal to the other. I apologize for sticking this in here, but the commenter in question left no way to just reply to them personally.

10.0 (adapted from a contribution by cj304)

It was a familiar sight to the Lights. Dr. Wily was gloating about his latest brilliant scheme to conquer the world from the relative safety of a skull-themed battlecraft as Rock, aka Mega Man, and Roll, aka Mega Woman, and their allies faced off against the Robot Masters and the co-opted robot forces they fielded.

"–and only when the world's leaders sign all government power over to me will I–"

"YOU!" an unfamiliar voice pierced the scene and everyone turned to look at a large blue android that looked a great deal like a more mature Rock that was pointing a charging arm cannon directly at Dr. Wily. The mad doctor himself was so startled by the interruption that he stumbled from his perch.

It was probably the only thing that saved his life as the mysterious blue-armored robot unleashed a plasma bolt at least as large as himself that obliterated the skull craft even as Shadow Man caught the falling Dr. Wily.

Everyone stared at the raging blue android, shocked and horrified at the casual way he had nearly committed murder. Wily scrambled unceremoniously behind Shadow Man after landing and stared as well, trembling from his brush with death. Shadow Man stared, and tried to think up a way to survive such a powerful and enraged foe, or at least last long enough for Wily to get to safety. Rock and Roll stared, staring in horror at what looked like a sibling ranting about how he despised Wily so much that he would consider the deliberate murder of a human being. Doctor Light stared from where he was watching remotely, wondering what would drive what looked like a creation of his to such an act.

No one had the courage to make him stop shouting, to interrupt him, afraid it would set him off again. But the android, known to those in his home time as X, wasn't mad, he wasn't Viral, or Maverick, he was simply angry. So, so very angry. Angry beyond description. Because here he was, the man responsible for so much of it, the Uprisings, the Wars, the Devastated Environment, the *deaths* of–

"–and ignoring all of the *fighting* you caused! The *centuries* of political ramifications! The *monsters* born from your example! The *devastation* of the environment and near-total corruption of vital resources - *people starved and froze to death because we didn't have enough* ***energy*** - the worst part. About your **Virus** , about your sick **legacy** , your twisted **Last Laugh. The worst part about it is...** "

Here he stopped, gasping for breath to cool his systems, clearly overwhelmed by the deluge of emotions he'd likely been holding back for an unknown amount of time rushing to the front nearly overwhelming him to the point that his own systems couldn't keep up with the demand to express all the things he was feeling.

"The Reploids, they were called that because they were made from studying me. They were replications of me. But, but the first ones, they weren't perfect. They needed constant modifications, and someone to guide them through developing their Prototype

Personality Matrixes. They were blank slates that had no idea what they were doing beyond their build specializations. Like..."

He swallowed, seeming equally distraught and wrathful at the same instant.

"Like children. **MY** children! I watched them! I guided them! They looked up to me as their 'progenitor', as their 'source', as the closest thing they had to a father! And every new version after that was still family to me! Grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren! Even Sigma!"

None of them knew who Sigma was, but they all got a distinct feeling something like ice pool in their guts at the mention of his name, even Doctor Wily and Shadow Man seemed to understand where this was going.

"And who do you think he went after first, when he started infecting people for his first Uprising? It wasn't just the strong ones; it wasn't just the most advanced. It was the ones who knew him, the ones who knew Reploid Science best, because they were there when it was developed! The ones who were old and close enough to my coding that they might be modified to resist the Virus when people finally found out about it! The ones who would serve as symbols to the uninfected, whose support of his ideas would make Sigma seem less like a mad terrorist, and more like a freedom-fighter!"

X's whole body seemed to sag, his head facing the ground as he continued to list the sins that Wily had yet to commit, yet his Buster still pointed at the Mad Doctor, the center of the barrel starting to glow

"And who... do you think had to deal with them. Who do you think was both immune to the Virus, and understood their capabilities enough that they were sent to neutralize them?"

The penny dropped. Roll covered her mouth with her hands. Rock fell to his knees, gritting his teeth so hard they cracked, and Doctor

Light squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to stop thinking about it. Shadow Man stood ramrod still, not moving an inch, while Wily stared at the blue android pointing a weapon at him with so many conflicting emotions one couldn't tell what he was feeling.

"Do you understand, now? Do you know what that means? What I'm trying to say?"

X's head snapped up suddenly, his buster reaching beyond maximum charge, angry tears falling down his face to dissolve in its ambient heat.

" *BECAUSE OF YOU, I HAD TO KILL MY CHILD93|\|!1!11P$#ZX#$x_xl...*

JUMPSTART ATTEMPT USING SECTION 1 FAILED

Zero.I

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 1 using primary Anchor candidate:

Zero blinked as he came to awareness. He was kneeling in some sort of liquid and he could feel the cables attached to his back that led to machinery that was either defunct or barely functional from what he could tell. Plus, while the diagnostics were inconclusive, he couldn't feel his arms.

There were also sounds getting closer. Sounds of buster fire, explosions, and pained screams. The sounds of violence that he knew so well... Somehow...

"Wha?! What kind of monsters are these?!" the muffled shout was barely audible before a sound like a beam of some kind was heard and they fell silent.

'Wait...' he thought to himself, *'I remember something like this... Did this happen before...? Should I even be active right now,,,,,,/? #$#Cvt5HBY?$%C$%EtF*

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt I using primary Anchor candidate:

X wasn't entirely sure why he'd found one of Dr. Light's capsules in the area Armored Armadillo had taken over. Plus, as he approached it, he could have sworn that it hadn't been here before...

"Ah, X," the voice of Dr. Light spoke as his form appeared in a hologram, but it looked... different from what X had been subconsciously expecting, "you have managed to find this special capsule."

Dr. Light... had on camo pants, a tank top, and his hair was combed upwards into a flat-top.

"Within this capsule is a special gift, please enter now and receive it!"

Shrugging off the feeling, X stepped in and felt the capsule activate, downloading a technique into his systems called the Son1(800|\/|W$GCTtregc%$#...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero. II

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 2 using primary Anchor candidate:

Zero shook his head at the familiarity of events happening to him as he walked through the new resistance base to meet with the new commander.

And there he was, with his long platinum blond hair, beret-shaped light sticking out of his head, cyan shirt, and fuchsia longcoat. For some reason, Zero really wanted to just punch the guy's lights out, but he suppressed the instinct and walked over calmly to introduce himself.

"Ah, Zero! The living legend himself! I am Elpizo, the new commander of this base!" the reploid grinned energetically. "I've heard so much about you! Please let us join forces and destroy Neo Arcadia! With your combat prowess and my leadership, we are sure to be victorious! And then I can gain the invincible power of the Dark Elf and eradicate those pathetic humans who waste all our resources and make Ms. Ciel love me and..."

Elpizo trailed off as he became aware of Zero, and everyone else for that matter, staring at him incredulously.

"...and I said that ou7 L0|_||), |)1|)|\|"7 1V,?{?}B|"?^%...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt II using primary Anchor candidate:

"Kugh," Gate grunted around the severe damage to his golden battle armor as X stood over him. "I lost even though I used Zero's DNA... No... Ugh... I should've... analyzed it more... Wa... was there a... fault in the program...? But... ack... this is not the end. I don't... ack... give up so easily... I prepared for this just in case. Ha ha. I really... don't want to use this... I might be destroyed as well, but... I brought back the evil... Si... Sigma..."

X thought he was prepared for what some part of him knew would be Sigma revealing himself, but watching the partially completed body simply shamble in through the door wasn't what he'd been expecting.

"Heh... hehehehehe..." the seemingly walking dead form of Sigma chuckled darkly. "Bring... me back... did you? Fool... I cannot die... I am... the living dead... and now... so are you...!"

Sigma raised his one hand and something... dark and foreboding snaked from it and into Gate's dying body, causing the heavily damaged reploid scientist to stand back up, slowly and bending in unnatural ways.

"What...?" X backed away, having no idea what was going on and not liking it at all.

"Come... Gate..." Sigma stared at the confused X as the two raised their arms (all three between them) stiffly forwards and began to swing them back and forth in time to a tune that came from nowhere. "Dance... wit4 |\/|3GVL]'45\?$%"./\]']...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero. III

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 3 using primary Anchor candidate:

"Not bad, Zero!" Dr. Weil laughed. "But Omega's power is much greater than you've been led to expect. Go get him Omega! Release the power of the Dark Elf!"

"GrrrrrrRRRRRAAWWRR!" the already large yellow robot roared as a bright light burst forth from it before dying downfown to reveal...

Zero stared at the giant form of Omega that emerged. It looked... wrong. The red and blue arms attached to the white torso should have had heads at the shoulders that looked like himself and X, but...

But instead they had hands that... the blue one looked like some sort of wolf while the red one almost looked like a dino5An965ETEG53%&^$$#*GTR34v$fd...

ATTEMPT FAILED

X.3

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt III using primary Anchor candidate:

Things had been a bit weird for X lately. It had been a routine response to another mechaniloid Maverick when things had gone... strange. At least for him personally. Sigma had taken Zero and a battalion and cordoned off an area around the out of control construction equipment and called for X to be air dropped into the area. On the way down, he'd gotten... flashes. Almost like memories.

Images of himself and Zero fighting against Sigma. In his normal form. In giant forms. In revived forms. In pure cyber-construct forms. In dead-yet-still-moving forms. In command of Maverick forces composed of some of the Hunter's most renowned members no less. Doing things that... wrought widespread catastrophe. Things that, even with the Hunters victorious, would take centuries for the world to fully recover from.

The rush of images had almost made X botch the operation, not to mention his landing.

In the end, he'd been so disoriented that Sigma himself had needed to step in and take care of things, showing why everyone called him

the Mega Man after the legendary hero.

"We must become both sword and shield for those who cannot protect themselves: that is our sworn duty. Never forget that!"

Those had been the words of Sigma to him that day. Which was why the current situation was so hard for him to accept. The one who had been sending the mechaniloids on a rampage. Who had massacred Hunters. Who had taken over the new missile base was... Sigma himself.

"Now's your chance, X," Sigma grinned as he held a captive Zero, X's comrade and best friend, in front of him. "Fire! If you really want to stop me, you'll have to shoot, destroying Zero in the process!"

'Why...?' X hesitated, not understanding why Sigma would do this. Had those flashes... been visions of the future? *'Why, Sigma? Why are you...?'*

"Hahahahaha!" Sigma laughed. "It seems you need a bit more encouragement, X!"

Sigma then tossed Zero into the air and slashed him across the chest with his beam saber as X watched, horrified.

"Agggghhhh!" Zero screamed in pain as he hit the ground, clutching his wound.

"Zero!"

"Not enough?" Sigma grinned maliciously. "How about this?"

The former commander of the Hunters dashed forward and grabbed X by the neck, lifting him up.

"Are you ready now?" Sigma taunted as he put his saber away and pulled out a remote trigger device. "Or perhaps you need even more reason to act? With one push of this button, I will launch every

missile in this facility at our cities! One is aimed straight at Maverick Hunter headquarters even!"

"Why...?" X choked out in confusion.

"Why?" Sigma grinned darkly. "Because you are the key to reploid evolution. For us to achieve our ultimate potential, you must first achieve yours! I thought that I could lead by example, but your progress is just too slow. And so I've decided to speed things up a bit, by making myself your opponent. History may despise me, but it is a small price to pay to see you become what you were meant to be! To see you become the Mega Man!"

X stared into the insane eyes of Sigma and felt something inside him rise up, like an immense pressure seeking release, and then something in h1|\/| 5|\|A993|)R%KCKIN]';/..43/;&^"}]]/...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero. IV

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 4 using primary Anchor candidate:

Zero wanted to hit something. Even after everything he'd done and all the enemies he'd defeated, Neo Arcadia was still under tyrannical rule. Now by some human madman named Dr. Weil.

And so he'd grabbed a bike and ridden out into the wastelands of the world, looking for something, anything, to take his mind off of things. To present to him some measure of clarity. Because it certainly wasn't forthcoming from anywhere else.

Then he spotted it. A massive derelict wreck off in the distance that tickled something in his memory. Something that called him to investigate further...

Before he knew what he was doing, he had turned towards the structure and accelerated. As he got closer, he could spot parts of the wreck that suggested it had once been a space station of some kind and when he was almost on top of it, he spotted the stylized 'R' on a relatively intact portion of the hull. A symbol that sparked a memory in him...

"Colonel!"

A memory of a reploid. A military man in black, white, and red. All over...

"I'm disappointed in you, Colonel!"

Memories of fighting against this man, and... Someone else. Someone he could almost, but not quite, see in his mind's eye... But he could hear that person's voice. A woman's voice, pleading for...

"This must be some kind of mistake!"

"Zero, please! Don't fight with my brother!"

Zero braked hard to avoid colliding with the structure in the sudden onslaught of memories and shook his head hard. What was all this about...?

Looking back, he firmed his features and stepped off the bike to enter the wreck.

"Someone... must stop Repliforce...!"

Yes... they'd been called Repliforce. Intended to help maintain peace... only...

"No! ... Please wait, Zero! I don't want to see you two fight..."

"I don't want to fight. Step back."

"Impressive, Zero. ...But it's too late!"

Only for the group to fall prey to the same... something... that plagued everyone else of that era... Forcing Zero to fight that man, Colonel; who he'd viewed as a friendly rival, a brother in arms, a dear friend; fight and slay him for the sake of the world...

And in the middle of it all was that woman reploid whose voice pierced his heart like an arrow each time it echoed through his mind... Why? Who had she been? What was she to him...?

"So you fought with my brother..."

"I'm sorry..."

"Then it's over. Everything..."

"Wait ...! Listen to me!"

"Good bye, Zero..."

Zero stumbled as he entered a chamber in the wreck. A chamber that screamed painful familiarity to his mind. What had happened here? What tragedy had befallen him?

He could partially see her now. An indistinct innocent figure of red, indigo, and brown. Holding the glowing program core of her deceased brother, the brother Zero had been forced to kill, and merge its program with her own. Then the indistinct form grew and became clear. An armored form of purple and lavender the size of a ride armor with metal wings and a huge arm cannon. And violent as it charged forth in maddened grief and inconsolable pain. Forced to choose between two impossible options and destroyed by it long before his beam saber shattered the external power core.

The explosion of the armored form... The sight of her on the ground, every detail as clear as if it had happened yesterday... Her innocent pained face, her long brown hair, armor in a style suited for a support role, not combat... Running towards her in a panic to make sure she would be okay, even as he knew it was an impossible hope...

"Iris! ...Iris..."

That was her name... Iris... Created by Dr. Cain to be the perfect enforcer of peace. Only for the dichotic nature of the creation's programming to necessitate splitting into two... Iris remaining the peaceful arbitrator and her brother Colonel created to house the strong-willed fighting instinct...

They'd... They'd worked together for the short time she'd been alive... They'd been comrades... friends... He'd...

"Zero..."

He'd loved her... And then he'd ended up killing her... Held her as she died in his arms... All because she'd wanted to live in a world where there was no fighting... With him... A world she'd concluded was impossible without enacting great tragedy...

"Hang in there, Iris."

"Zero..."

"Iris! Iris!"

As he collapsed to his knees involuntarily, Zero could almost swear he could still hear her...

"Zero..."

Just like that... Just...

The sound of motion jolted him out of his grief and Zero turned to the noise, saber at the ready as a figure slowly emerged from the shadows.

"I knew... you never forgot me... Zero..." the groaning feminine voice repeated as a black and lavender foot slid into view, attached to a red and indigo leg. Damaged and degraded seemingly beyond repair.

And then the rest began to emerge. That same form of red and indigo, but with rusted gashes and exposed circuitry that sparked feebly at random intervals, like it was attempting to emulate life but had long since lost the strength to do so. And then the face... the same face, but with wide tears in it showing the metal underneath, and the long brown hair, tattered and filthy with centuries of unwashed grime and dust.

"But now..." the decrepit spectre of his past love moaned out raspily as she shambled forwards and Zero felt the hilt of his saber fall from fingers shock had rendered unresponsive, "now... we can be... together... Together... as we couldn't... before... Peace is... impossible... for the... living... but not... the dead... We can be... together now..."

Zero tried to make his limbs move as the undead body of his former love began to reach for him with arms that began to twist and distort into wicked purple and lavender claws.

"Together... in deA74$TVY^$%./$%y65'b;Tr][...

ATTEMPT FAILED

X.4

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt IV using primary Anchor candidate:

X paused as he entered the chamber and saw the rookie Hunter, Double, within. Why did this seem so familiar...?

"Double, what are you doing here?" he asked, already getting the feeling that he knew the answer and wasn't going to like it.

"Heeheeh*eelp*... Hahaha*blorp*ha..." the portly yellow reploid began to laugh as his body began to bulge oddly. "Mavericks,

Hunters, Replifor*shlop*... All idiots... *glip* All too *urp* easy..."

"Double... what in the world...?" X backed away involuntarily. This was just too weird...

"Poor *elgksh*! Gonna get recy*clood* by the J*elp*o Dev*ilp*!" Double's body bulged and twisted as it grew, and grew... into a engorged pink gelatinous monstrosity with a single crims0|\| 3-3WL%E)T(U($lJ#Kfs...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero.V

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 5 using primary Anchor candidate:

"So this is the Ragnarok Core..." Zero mused as he walked into the chamber. All of this... just seemed so... *familiar* somehow... *'Think later,'* Zero shook his head to regain focus, *'stop Ragnarok from crashing now...'*

"Hehehe..." a familiar laugh rang out. "Welcome to your front seat for the end of the world!"

"Dr. Weil...?!" Zero jumped in surprise and took a combat stance as he looked around for the source of the voice. "Impossible! No one could have survived that attack from Ragnarok!"

"That's easy..." Weil's voice continued as something teleported into the room, the sight of which caused the keyed-up Zero to stare in slack-jawed disbelief. "Because I... am a little teapot!"

Zero continued staring as the thing that was apparently Dr. Weil broke out in song.

'The F#%]?654[[(8}...

ATTEMPT FAILED

X.5

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt V using primary Anchor candidate:

"So..." X began hesitantly as he addressed the figure before him, "you're the one who's been causing so much trouble...?"

"I do apologize," the reploid in question bowed deeply, "I, Axl, have left Red Alert after... differences of opinion to become a Hunter under the legendary X!"

"Uh... huh..." X replied dubiously. "And you say you're... Axl, was it?"

"Yes indeed," the reploid stated quickly, "who else would I be?"

"Well..." X thought of how to phrase this, "you frankly look like Serges in a bad mask."

"What?!" Signas, the new Hunter commander, sputtered in surprise as he did a double-take.

"Curses! You saw through my brilliant disguise!" the identified Serges swore. "X-Hunters attack!"

From various places in the room, Serges's comrades leapt out and charged at X.

'Agile... Violen (how'd he fit in that flower pot anyway?)... and it looks like Bit and Byte tagged along this time...' X thought as he calmly charged up his arm cannon. "X BUSTER!"

A dusty explosion rocked the room, oddly damaging nothing but still propelling all five figures out of a convenient window and into the distance.

"Looks like the X-Hunters are blasting off agaaaaiiiinnn..."

'Honestly, that's the third time this m0|\|74{%']b\]'.bp/[pl6$%?}[_+=...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero. VI

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt VI using secondary Anchor candidate:

Zero grunted as the blow from his opponent sent his beam saber spinning upwards out of his grip, the follow-up blow sending his to his knees. His opponent chuckled darkly as he caught the hilt of Zero's beam saber and swung it in an arc that chopped the crimson hunter's leg off before he could stand again.

As he screamed in pain, Zero wondered what had happened to his former comrade. He had no idea why Vile had turned on the Hunters, but some part of himself insisted this fight seemed familiar. That same part of himself also seemed to think it had been a long time ago, but... they had been performing missions together just last week. It... it made no sense!

"And so ends the mighty Zero," Vile taunted as he began charging up his shoulder cannon. "I'd like to say it was nice knowing you, but... I'd be lying."

*Pnnnnnnnnnn-Y0\/\/WR?GC654^%$ CFRhyr54...

ATTEMPT FAILED

X.6

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 6 using secondary Anchor candidate:

X had no idea how long it had been since he'd felt his body. He just knew that he'd gotten tired of all the endless fighting and the general insanity. Particularly the parts that had seemingly warped reality.

Had those even happened? He wasn't sure. All he was sure of was that he'd given up his body to seal a great and dark power for the sake of the future and left the world's fate in other hands.

Hands that were now being tested. But he'd prepared for this. He always knew that his friend might come back one day and so he'd kept the old weapon. The situation even seemed familiar. Except... Why did some of his memories insist that his heroic friend was Zero, the scientist held captive by the golem, instead of the warrioress Ciel?

He just wasn't sure of anything anym063#VVY^rtkm$%?"^%4;...

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero. VII

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 7 using primary Anchor candidate:

Zero's head hurt. For one thing, he kept getting weird flashbacks of... other lives? Stasis dreams? He didn't know. For another, every time he removed his helmet, he completely lost control of his body to an alternate personality that was...

Well, he was a total wuss, that's what he was. Honestly, Zero was ashamed to share processing space with him.

Of course, that was neither here nor there at the moment. Right now, Zero was meeting with the leader of Heaven, the capital city of Neo Arcadia (housed in a gigantic cross-shaped building no less).

"Welcome, Zero," the figure wearing a visored helmet greeted him. The voice sounded familiar somehow. "Truly, I never thought I would again meet the ancient hero."

Zero blinked. "Have... we met?"

"Ah, right, your memory problem," the figure nodded and moved to remove the helmet. "Perhaps this will jog your circuits."

Zero backed away in shock. He did recognize the individual. From those flashbacks. "Lumine?!"

"Ah, you *do* remember me," the purple haired reploid smiled, "that simplifies things greatly. You see, Zero, after you went to sleep, I returned and perfected the new-type reploids. Eradicated the old-style Mavericks one by one and destroyed any potential for resurgences by eradicating the rest of the old-style reploids. Even your former comrade X did not evade my grasp, only you in your hidden repose escaped. I was soon made the head of a utopia of my own design: Neo Arcadia. With all humans and new-types under my command, I became revered as a GOD! And with my new-type reploids, I reign supreme! And now... the time has come to finally remedy old mistakes. Shitennou!"

"Sir!" the four figures of Fighting Fefnir, Sage Harpuia, Fairy Leviathan, and Hidden Phantom declared as they entered behind Lumine.

"Join with me! Become the ultimate reploid and execute Zero!"

"Scream! Shout! We are the Fallen Angel!" the four yelled enthusiastically and leapt for their leader, combining in a blinding flash of light that obscured Zero's vision. But he could almost see the outline of a familiar armor, with four wings 1|\| A|\| 54A93}^ %:$^:^$:F$KFr...

ATTEMPT FAILED

X.7 (OathToOblivion)

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt VII using primary Anchor candidate:

X had no clue what was going on. The last thing he remembered was being a Cyber Elf and entrusting the world's future to Zero, and now he was somehow in his body again...fighting Vile?! But Vile had died ages ago, back before the Elf Wars! Whatever, he was under attack, and he needed to do something unless he wanted to lose his body again. Instinctively shifting to Shotgun Ice (Shotgun Ice? He hadn't used that in decades.), he fired a few rounds off to stop Vile's incessant shooting, then dashed backwards in order to gain some distance. It was then that he noticed something off.

"Hey, Vile, since when were you green?" X questioned. Indeed, his opponent was green rather his usual purple.

"Vile? Who's Vile? I'm the elite bounty hunter, Boba Fett, and your head will fetch a pretty price, Mega Man X," his opponent declared, shooting him with...lasers?!

'What in the world is going-#$VfxfrbyhRFBabAvAVa?'

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero. VIII

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt VIII using secondary Anchor candidate:

The year 22XX:

"Careful Axl," Zero told his long-time partner as the two flanked the gate leading to the Maverick leader's inner stronghold, even as he tried to shake the feeling that his partner should have been someone else... someone blue... "there's no telling what this guy has up his sleeve this time."

"Roger, Zero," the brash youngster, at least in Zero's mind, grinned as he raised his Copy Pistol. "Ready when you are."

"Okay, on three. One... two..."

As one, the two turned and blew the gate open and rushed inside, to be greeted by the sight of the black-cloaked figure of the Maverick leader.

"Give it up, Epsilon!" Zero shouted. "There's nowhere to run this time!"

"Run?" Epsilon laughed from his place in the shadows. "Why would I do such a thing like that? After all–"

SKRRCH

The year 21XX:

"–you know I can never die," Sigma grinned malevolently in his latest body.

Zero shook his head in confusion and glanced at Axl. The rookie hunter didn't seem to have noticed the sudden shift in reality. Zero shook off the disorientation and returned his attention to Sigma.

"I'll return again and again until–"

SKRRCH

The year 20XX:

"–you acknowledge the truth of who I am to you," the hologram of an old balding man in a labcoat and tie with wild gray hair sprouting from the sides of his head grinned madly. A man Zero felt looked all too familiar to a deep, buried part of his mind. "That you are–"

SKRRCH

The year 2XX1:

"–nothing more than a Maverick yourself!" Dr. Doppler accused with a fervor that would have had a human frothing at the mouth. "You should–"

SKRRCH

The year X2X1:

"–leave now," the giant form of the General, supreme leader of Repliforce, demanded as Zero shook his head in confusion. "You cannot walk in here and simply accuse us–"

SKRRCH

The year 2XX2:

"–of being Mavericks," Colonel Redips scoffed. "Only history can truly say which of us was in the wrong. It is only right that we seek to evolve to the–"

SKRRCH

The year X21X:

"–strongest we can be!" Berkana grinned madly. "Come, Zero! Axl! Test yourselves against–"

SKRRCH

The year X2X2:

"–my unparalleled strength!" the vupline reploid with nine tails declared as Zero and Axl readied themselves. "Your might shall prove–

SKRRCH

The year 2X1X:

"–impressive," Gareth grunted in admiration as Zero and Axl's weapons bounced off his shield. "But it will prove–"

SKRRCH

The year X22X:

"–useless!" Gate screamed, eyes wide with madness as he unleashes a blast that blew Zero and Axl back. "I may be insane, but it's just so–"

SKRRCH

The year X2X2:

"–terrifying..." Red shook as he tried to hold himself back. "Please, stop me before–"

SKRRCH

The year 2X2X:

"–you get hurt!" Dynamo sneered confidently at the two. "After all, neither of you can match my coolness or–"

SKRRCH

The year X1X2:

"–power," High Max intoned. "I have surpassed you, Zero. I may have been created from your data, but I am the stronger of us. You have no–"

SKRRCH

The year X2XX:

"–chance!" Omega loomed over them menacingly. "But then, it is better that you don't, Zero. Because they may call me the 'devil reploid', the messiah of darkness, but we know the truth, don't we?"

SKRRCH

The year XXXX:

Zero blinked as the constantly shifting terrain resolved itself into the decimated lab that he himself had originally been found in, and the foe he and Axl had been facing was no longer there.

"We all know who the real evil is..." a voice Zero knew very well spoke sinisterly from behind him, punctuated by Axl's pained gurgle.

Zero turned around; certain he didn't want to see what this new form of his distorting opponent was, but unable to stop himself; to see a sickly purple beam saber blade protruding from Axl's torso as the light of life went out in the younger reploid's eyes. And behind him...

Was what appeared to be Zero himself. Only clad in armor that glowed with sinisterly purple light instead of his normal red. A nightmare with his face...

"It's you, Zero," the foe with his face spoke with his voice. "You and the virus you carry... The source of all Mavericks... The world will never be at peace as long as you l1^3%|}$%{:$:#$**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 8 using secondary Anchor candidate:

X floated in troubled unconsciousness as he digested the memories that tormented him. Fevered stasis dreams and over a hundred years of experiences mixed together in a parade of dark strangeness. All of it pointed to one thing...

"It was all your fault."

...wait. That wasn't a memory... That was a voice... He knew that voice...

X fought his way back to consciousness and opened his awareness, to see a red-eyed face staring straight at him. A familiar face... His own...

"That's what I've come to realize," the replica of himself continued. "You were the first. The one that all the rest after were modeled on. It was your ability to chart your own destiny that did it, combined with your incredible power, that dictated the tragedy that followed. No reploid would have ever gone Maverick without those things after all."

The copy of himself began to circle and X found he couldn't move, not even to follow the figure with his eyes.

"But that wasn't enough, was it? You had to try and be a pacifist in a time and place that was always one step away from war. You had to squander your infinite potential trying to keep the peace even as an endless parade of despots and destroyers took advantage of your kindness to wreak havoc on the world. You had to paint a target of everything you cared about because you were too 'nice' to defend it. To do what was necessary."

X watched, unable to make a sound, as the reploid with his face, his body, stepped in front of him once more.

"I know all about what happened with you. You sealed yourself away because you evolved your emotions right out of your system just to keep from snapping under the stress. And the funny thing is that you honestly think that's when you stopped caring, isn't it? That you stopped caring about others when you finally deleted your emotions, but that's a lie. You never cared, did you? Because, if you had cared it would have never gotten that bad."

X wanted to refute everything, but his impotent words only echoed in his own mind.

"But I don't have that problem. I succeeded where you failed. I've taken the surviving humans and reploids and forged a utopia out of them. One without Mavericks, because I'm not afraid to dispose of the problem cases like you were. Because I care enough to fix the prob13|\/|5P^MFP,o4%]/^|}**********

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero. IX

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 2 activation attempt IX using secondary Anchor candidate:

Zero breathed heavily in the decrepit lab he found himself in. He didn't know what was going on with himself, only that he'd come out of a stasis pod in a murderous rage at... something... and decimated everything in sight. Even the figures that must have been reploids, or possibly humans, that had come to try and fight or restrain him. He couldn't be sure which.

The burning fury had only dissipated when he recognized the face of his last victim.

Sigma.

The leader of the Mavericks for endless years, or was he? Hadn't he only gone mad after being infected by the fire that now burned through his circuits? Zero wasn't sure of anything. Only the burning ceaseless rage that he now struggled to keep under control. But it fought him every step of the way. Was that half-remembered dream of another him right? Was he a monster?

It would certainly explain why he'd been singing that song ever since he'd half-snapped out of it.

"This secret side I keep hid under lock and key. The virus is caged, but I can't control it. Cause if I let it out, we'll be torn up and broken down. Why won't somebody come and save me from this? Make it end!"

"Is someone down here?" a voice Zero knew all too well echoed down into the room and he wanted to plead with the owner not to enter. Not to see him like this. But the virus wanted something else. It wanted to rip and tear the owner of that voice apart, and that desire spiked when the blue armor came into view. "Hello? Can you hear me? Do you need help?" X stepped in, his face a mask of worry as he scanned the room and saw the bodies. "Commander Sigma?!" he yelled as he rushed in and ran to the dead reploid. "What happened?" he looked around, before spotting the figure of Zero half hidden in the shadows. "Did... did you do this?"

Zero wanted to tell X to run, as far and as fast as he could, but when he opened his mouth, all that came out was more song as the rage within forced him to stagger forwards as he tried to make his body go the other way. *"I feel it deep within, It's just beneath the skin... I must confess that I feel like a monster!"*

"What... what are you?" X backed up a step, a horrified look on his face.

"I hate what I've become," Zero continued singing against his will, clutching his head in pain as sinister purple energy began to flicker

over his form, *"but the nightmare's just begun! I must confess that I fEeL lIKe A mONsTER!"*

Zero clamped down on the virus, forcing it back down after it made his voice go all guttural as X formed an arm cannon and pointed it at him.

"It's hiding in the dark! Its teeth are razor sharp! There's no escape for me: It wants my soul, It wants my heart!" Zero tried to inject the warning into the lyrics, but he knew even before X's expression firmed that his friend would never run. His only friend, even if they'd never met?

"What's wrong? How can I help?"

"No one can hear me scream..." Zero whispered as he took in the desire to help on X's face. *"Maybe this is just a dream... Or maybe it's inside of me..."* he continued, realizing that if there was anyone at all he could trust to stop him if he lost control, to take him out if he became the monster, it was X... *"X, please, stop this m0|\|573R!?$% {}V];************************

ATTEMPT FAILED

X.9

Yggdrasil Log: Megaverse Section 3 activation attempt 9 using secondary Anchor candidate:

X looked at the form of his best friend. A bit different from before, but it was still very clearly Zero. It was... good to see his old friend again after so long. But the most telling thing about this emotional moment was... he didn't feel any of it.

"Zero..." he spoke, wondering at the sound of his own voice, the one that sounded so much like the copy that had taken over in his place.

"I... I can't even recall how long it's been since I've been fighting alone... Battle after battle... loss after loss... insanity after insanity..."

"...X?" Zero looked a little creeped out.

"Heh..." X chuckled as some odd part of his mind decided to latch onto a song he'd heard... somewhere... somewhen... and began to play it. Music, and a chorus of his own voice echoing around them.

"Bum bum be-dum bum bum be-dum bum," the chorus went.

"Zero, what's wrong with me?" X asked, genuinely wanting to know the answer.

"Bum bum be-dum bum bum be-dum bum."

"Why do I feel like this?" When had he stopped feeling at all?

"Bum bum be-dum bum bum be-dum bum."

"I... I'm going crazy now," he really was.

"Bum bum be-dum bum bum be-dum bum."

"X?"

"Got no more fight, I feel dead," X continued, heedless of the question in his delirium.

"Please don't get me started," the chorus added.

"Never heard, never said," he'd been silent for so long.

"I just can't speak about it."

"I'm out my life and my head," oh, was he ever.

"Won't even think about it."

"Feels like I'm going insane, yeeaaahh!" and... he thought some part of him liked it.

Zero began backing up as he watched the Elf form of his former friend lose his mind right in front of him.

"Twas thief in the night that came and grabbed me," X began to explain in the song. *"It just creeped up inside and consumed me. A disease of the mind that now controls me."*

Then the chorus joined his words. *"And. It's. Too. Close. For. Comfort."*

Zero ignited his saber in an effort to warn X to keep his distance. Zero... his best friend.

"I made the pretty lights and built a city of wonder, where if you didn't play nice, well then, you might just go under. Better think twice or your train of thought will be altered, so if you must falter be wiiise."

"X, what's gotten into you?" Zero finally gave voice to his worries.

"My mind is in disturbia!" X answered truthfully. *"It's like the darkness is the light!"* after all, his friend deserved no less. *"Disturbia! Am I scaring you tonight?"* After all, Zero had been strong enough to stand up and fight after X himself had given up. Zero was the only one that could stop X's madness, even if that meant killing him. *"Disturbia! Can't remember what I'm like... Disturbia! Distu68|A!MLM$#O 43'[.$? #*****************************

ATTEMPT FAILED

Zero.X

Hephaestus sighed. This... This just wasn't working. It wasn't trying to activate both sections at once that was the problem, the system

was handling that just fine. It was...

"Excuse me, Hephaestus," Brynhildr's voice came over the intercom from the reception area, "but Athena is here to see you."

Hephaestus sighed and pushed back from his terminal before getting up and limping over to the door to see what his sister wanted.

Opening the door, he saw the typically calm face of the Olympian goddess of wisdom, as well as the general of Olympian forces in times of battle (much to the eternal consternation of Ares), looking apologetic.

"I'm sorry, brother," Athena began formally, "but I'm afraid you've been assigned a student to instruct in the operation, maintenance, and repair of Yggdrasil."

Hephaestus blinked several times as this sunk in. "Why? I already have more than enough on my plate at the moment! If it weren't for my parole officers being able to watch my less problematic assignments, I'd be stretched beyond my limit!"

"I'm aware, and I brought this up, but *father* ," Athena spat the title out viciously before regaining her calm, "made the argument that you are among the most knowledgeable and capable admins available, you have watchers who can ensure you are fulfilling the task, and the subject in question has been held up from her induction to her new duties for far too long as it is."

"Her...?" Hephaestus blinked. "You don't mean...?"

"I'm afraid he was *very* persuasive," Athena apologized. "Enough that I can still find no fault in his reasoning, and not for a lack of trying..."

The goddess of wisdom sighed again before motioning another figure over, an apparently teen girl with long pink hair and a flowing pale pink dress that looked at the ground, refusing to meet his eyes.

"I'll leave you two to get acquainted," Athena bowed and left the office.

Hephaestus stood there for a minute, waiting to see if the girl would say anything before sighing heavily. "I'm not going to bite," he said at last.

"Um..." the girl fidgeted nervously, "I mean... I didn't think you would... It's just..."

"You have not had a warm reception from many since your Ascension, have you Madoka Kaname?" Hephaestus folded his arms pointedly.

"Um... no... not really..."

"They blame you for Ascending to the divine level," the forge god stated evenly, "our level of existence, despite the fact that you were the designated Anchor for your branch of Yggdrasil, meaning that the entire section of reality you held up collapsed from your very absence in its infrastructure. They proceed to ignore the well-known fact that your familiar was the one who subtly goaded you towards ever-greater heights of power as well as the fact that none took the time to warn you of the dangers inherent in acquiring too much in the Loops."

"Right..." the girl agreed readily.

"They are also suspicious of the fact that you do not seem to mourn the loss of your reality or that of your looping friends, only looking so far to discover that your branch's data has vanished without a trace, leaving only the Hub backups remaining to restore it from when the Loop protocols conclude. They do not look hard enough to see that shortly after your Ascension, there was a data transfer of your branch before it faded into nonexistence."

Madoka started sharply at the claim as Hephaestus reached out over her shoulder and pulled a living piece of wood in the form of a bow

out of nowhere.

"A data transfer to this very divine tool if I'm not mistaken."

"What?" Madoka stared in shock at what the forge god had just done. That... only she was supposed to be able to call her bow forth. Right?

Hephaestus chuckled and handed the bow back to her. "Ah, that never gets old. Young lady, I am one of the Admins that comprised the team which *developed* the protocols for ontological paradox storage of divine tools. We all learned a few tricks that others have never bothered to research."

"I... see..." Madoka accepted her bow and put it away.

"I also saw the files on you collecting the looping version of your friend Homura, among others, to add to the data on your bow. It's why you never mourned for your lost reality, because you haven't really lost it yet, have you?"

"...no..." Madoka said quietly. "Please..."

"I won't say anything, and from the way my lovely parole officers seem engrossed in their peripheral intern duties, I dare say they've gone temporarily deaf. You will have to address these things eventually, but not now."

Madoka looked around at the three Valkyries that she realized must have heard everything typing away busily and looked back at Hephaestus. He was now standing aside and gesturing to the interior of his office. Taking a deep breath, Madoka stepped through.

"What we do now is I do my best to teach you the ropes as an Admin, and afterwards you will likely be slotted into some low-level busywork job to free someone more experienced for more pressing projects. I know it's likely not what you hoped for, but that is the way of things now."

Madoka was vaguely listening, but her attention had been grabbed by a pair of profiles still active on her new teacher's console. "What are...?"

"Ah," Hephaestus nodded, "them. I suppose my latest problem is as good a place as any to start. You see, these two are known in their reality as X and Zero. They are the primary players of note in not one, but two distinct sections of a very damaged branch. As fate and Yggdrasil would have it, they are both the only currently viable Anchor candidates for both sections and they are proving rather... difficult to set in place."

"What's wrong?" Madoka prompted as she looked over the data on the two. She didn't yet understand the particulars, but some part of her could tell that they were in such *pain* .

"What's wrong is that they are proving unstable on their own," Hephaestus sighed. "If I didn't need both sections looping, I'd ask Yggdrasil to set one as a normal looper early and be done with it, but I do need both sections. While this branch, which for simplicity's sake has been designated the 'Megaverse' after the title of its most notable heroes, has numerous sections, they have interwoven data along two distinct timelines. Sections 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 comprise the largest timeline with 4 and 5 as the other. I have section 1 active and my current project is sections 2 and 3. The issue is that sections 6 and 7, 6 in particular, rely on the events of section 3 to even exist, which in turn relies on section 2, which relies on section 1. Trying to activate section 3 without section 2 would invite paradoxical disaster even if it worked, but if I write off section 3 in favor of getting section 2 online, it is tantamount to sentencing the entirety of sections 6 and 7 to oblivion as well."

"And you can't accept that..." Madoka interrupted, before realizing what she'd done and looking away.

"No," Hephaestus agreed, deciding not to complicate matters further by delving into the issue of the scattered data of 'section X', "nor do I believe for a moment that my loopers would ever forgive me for such

an action. The issue remains that both X and Zero undergo very high levels of mental stress in their baselines. Levels that would outright shatter the psyches of lesser mortals and the repeated experiencing of which is already proving too much for them."

Madoka looked a little confused.

"Among other things about this branch are an exponentially higher number of bugs, viruses, and other issues than is average," Hephaestus explained. "One such bug is granting memory access of failed activation attempts to all the loopers that undergo them. It is proving very frustrating, but I have become resigned to the notion that this will prove normal for all sections of this branch. In any case, X and Zero, for all their strength, each regard the other as the unshakable pillar that will continue to stand should they themselves fall. Without regular contact with a version of their friend who remembers past Loops to share the burden, I fear that their very souls will snap under the strain and with them–"

"–and with them, their whole realities could collapse as well," Madoka immediately understood the implications.

"Yes."

"There's no way you can have them looping together?" Madoka pondered the problem as she studied the two's data. She could see the connection. Not a bond between souls, but one almost as important in its own way. A bond between comrades. Brothers. By blood shed if not by blood born. The strength to help the other stand when they couldn't on their own. Two pillars of strength that were very separate, but always stood stronger together.

"No..." Hephaestus mused. "Not with needing each to Anchor their own section... Unless..."

Hephaestus suddenly moved a lot faster than his limp would suggest him capable of, plunging into his chair and fingers flying across the terminal before his forward momentum had even begun to halt.

Madoka stared as lines of code sprung into being that she couldn't even begin to comprehend, much less offer aid with.

"Maybe if..." she heard her new instructor mutter to himself. "Yes, if I thread the code from the Anchor point like so to the other section and did that from both ends... Yes, this could work..."

As Madoka watched the forge god code away in awe, Hephaestus smiled widely, double-checked his work, and prepared to activate the attempt. As an afterthought, he added a tandem link to the next iteration of section 1 for extra stability. "I apologize for not explaining things, but with any luck I can show you the ropes during this attempt without anything serious cropping up."

BEGIN JOINT SECTION ACTIVATION ATTEMPT USING EXPERIMENTAL PROTOCOLS DESIGNATED 'HEPHAESTUS 2'? Y/N

Y:\ Y

BEGINNING LOOP...

10.0) Because, as cj304 pointed out when he posted the original this is adapted from, X is canonically nicknamed "The Father of all Reploids".

Zero.I) Zero's understandably confused.

X.1) At least he didn't have rainbow hair.

Zero. II) Well... that might have resolved itself...

X.2) It's a Thriller night!

Thriller by Michael Jackson: www. youtube watch? v=4V90AmXnguw

Zero. III) Omegamon plot bunny by Reydrago. Snip by me.

X.3) Maverick Hunter X: Day of Sigma, with a couple of tweaks. Honestly, I think that version of Sigma scares me more than the typical interpretation of him.

Zero. IV) I know it's terrible of me, but the idea of zombie!Iris came up back when I was writing Loop 1.0 and I knew I had to write it, no matter how much it would torment Zero. Honestly, I like the guy a lot, but his canon history makes him way too easy to torment. Then again, X doesn't exactly have it any better...

X.4) Interesting fact: When I first fought Double way back when, people were calling his other form Jello Man. No idea where that came from in the first place, but it stuck with me and so he became the Jello Devil here. In any case, have a song for him. The Blob seems appropriate at least.

The Blob Theme Song: www. youtube watch? v=AK5jyVCdXwc

Zero.V) ...lolwut?

X.5) I... got nothing.

Zero. VI) Eh, not much to see here. Just a cool line Vile had during his one appearance in the Megaman cartoon that I really liked.

X.6) Yeah, switching sections wasn't really working out there.

Zero. VII) The Zero Manga. Sort of. Your mileage may vary on whether the original material makes more sense or not. Also Shitennou = "Four Heavenly Kings"

Fallen Angels by Black Veil Brides: www. youtube watch? v=VuGzJVKtW6g

X.7) Oath: Well, everyone calls Vile a Boba Fett rip-off to begin with. Now it's come full circle.

Me: Going back to their original sections doesn't seem to be working either...

Zero. VIII) o_O

Zero. IX) Zero's having some problems...

Monster by Skillet: www. youtube watch? v=0jLp-qP9iYs

X.9) X is... (sorry for the pun) disturbed.

Disturbia by Rihanna: www. youtube watch? v=Lm0IzB10JTo

Zero.X) Madoka is the former Anchor of the Puella Magi branch who Ascended to Adminhood, which also caused the collapse of her branch. But she saved the data on her bow before it could disappear and then tracked down her looping friend Homura to recover her and put her on the bow (as seen in the MLP Loops). Some people on the Spacebattles forums have talked about her learning the ropes from Hephaestus, so I thought I'd run with that.

As for the rest of the Zero.X Loop that will activate both the X and Zero sections, that will be done via flashback, told by X and Zero themselves to the other Megaverse loopers (including Lan and Hub who are up next). For now, enjoy the fact that X and Zero have officially joined the Loops and expect to see them in upcoming compilations!

A Mega Halloween

A Mega Halloween

Roll smiled as she walked into the children's hospital wearing an indigo dress with black stockings, indigo boots, a violet cape with a jack-o-lantern clasp, and a matching tall pointy indigo had with a green ribbon. With her she carried a wooden broom and a yawning Tango. She loved helping others and volunteering at children's hospitals was fast becoming one of her favorite activities to de-stress. To remind herself that for all the pain and devastation she regularly saw as Mega Woman, there was still plenty of people who gave of themselves to make life better for others.

And holidays like Halloween were some of her favorite times to come. Besides, her family knew her plans and had scheduled the parties around them. She wouldn't miss out on any quality time.

"Roll's here!" a childish voice squealed and the sound of a squeaky wheelchair speeding down the hall reached her ears.

One of the nurses, dressed like an Egyptian queen, chuckled. "They've all been so excited. They're eager to hear more stories about you and your brother saving the world."

"I'm glad they like them so much," Roll smiled back as she set Tango down gently. Usually animals weren't allowed in the hospital, but an exception had been made for Tango provided the robo-cat behaved himself. "In fact, I've got the perfect story for today."

"Oh, this I've got to hear," the nurse smiled.

"You will," Roll smiled back before bringing out a giant bag of candy she'd somehow managed to keep hidden, "but first, trick or treating!" (1)

"Okay everyone, settle down!" Roll called out to the horde of costumed children as they munched on their candy in a general crawl towards inevitable hyperactivity. "I can't tell this story if you're all talking!"

The children got quiet in a hurry as they all stared expectantly at their visitor. Well, most of them.

"Story! Story!" several younger children began chanting.

"Yep!" Roll chirped. "And this one's special, because it happened on a Halloween night just like this one. While all of his friends were fighting elsewhere, my brother had to face the most terrifying foe he's ever met."

"What did Wily do this time?" a kid piped up. "Was it the night of the living monster bots?"

"You'll just have to listen, won't you?" Roll winked. "But I'll tell you that this time it wasn't Dr. Wily behind it. Nor did he put someone else up to it. No, this was an altogetherly *far* more terrifying foe..."

"Oooooo..." the children chorused both eagerly and ominously. Though a few scattered giggles ruined the effect.

"As I said," Roll began again, her voice dropping to an ominous timbre as Tango sat down and started to play a musical tune that began with a series of beats and snapping fingers (2), "it started on a Halloween night like this one. The sun was just setting and the Light family was preparing to entertain trick-or-treaters like you for the night..."

"That's... that's great Auto, but... um..." Rock, at times known as the great hero Mega Man, did his best to think of a way to say this delicately. "Are you... sure those things are... safe?"

"Of course!" the robotic shopkeeper and part-time lab helper vocalized the grin his metal jaw was incapable of as he gestured to the automatic trick-or-treat candy dispensers he'd built. Each one was done in the style of an iconic movie monster.

At least if those movie monsters had looked exactly like Auto. (3)

"Auto's automatic tricky treat dispensers will be a hit! Just you wait! The kids will come up like so and they'll–"

Auto was cut off as all of the candy dispensers began shooting candy at him like he was the victim and they were the firing squad.

"Ow! Hey! Quit it!" Auto yelped as the merciless barrage continued. "Mega Man, help! Stop these crazy things!"

As if those were the magic words, the dispensers all jumped and stopped shooting.

"Honestly, Auto," Roll's voice sighed from behind the devices as she walked into their view, holding the reinforced broom she used both for cleaning the lab and for cleaning the clocks of evil robots as Mega Woman, "why do you keep building these things? At this rate you'll end up doing Wily's work for him!"

"Sorry..."

The chuckling voice of Dr. Light headed off Roll's inevitable chewing out and he seemed about to say something when the television sprang to life. A while back, he'd programmed all of the media devices in the lab to do that in case of breaking news, which was exactly what was happening.

"This is Plum reporting for BNC News," a pink-haired human-like robot wearing a baseball-style cap with metal ear coverings and a red and yellow mini-dress declared, "here on the scene at the Mega City junkyard where a large number of robots have begun mysteriously pouring out of the facility. Cursory reports indicate them

to be Joe-series robots in varying states of disrepair that have suddenly and inexplicably begun shambling about the premises. So far, they seem to be doing little else and... wait... I'm getting a police report that the robots have begun congregating and are now headed in this general direction. As I speak, a police robot is going in to determine their intentions. There he is," the camera panned to a blue and white police model holding his hand up, "he's now calling for the robots to identify themselves and state their intentions and...

"Brrrraaaaaaiiiiiiinnnnnssss..." the chorus of mechanical groans went up as those closest to the police robot suddenly burst forward with unexpected speed to grab the law enforcement unit.

"What in the... they're grabbing him and OH MY GOD!"

"They tore the poor robot apart, rending his parts from his frame and then attaching them to those among their own who were lacking them," Roll continued to a wide-eyed audience. "But that was just the beginning, for right then we got the call. This kind of thing was happening all over. In so many places that all the Light masters, the Cossack masters, the army, and every friend we had was soon mobilized to stop it."

Roll paused as she took in the terrified and expectant faces around the room, and signaled Tango to switch musical tracks to a score comprised primarily of percussion that given the tale almost sounded like it was being played on coffins. (4)

"The Zombie Joes were on the march..."

The March of the Zombie Joes had shut down the city and many surrounding areas, all of the people retreating to the perceived safety of indoors, and Mega Man was getting frustrated. The tide of what could only be called undead robots and their sickly red optics was seemingly endless. For every one he shot down with his buster, half a dozen more moved ever closer. And that wasn't even mentioning

the fact that they cannibalized any machine that wandered too close for parts and repairs, including their own fallen.

And then it happened. The thickening horde had finally advanced to the point where they lunged for Mega Man with sudden speed and ferocity, grabbing his armor and beginning to pull.

'I am not *going down to a bunch of B-horror movie rejects!'* Mega Man narrowed his eyes and called up the Top Spin weapon and began to rotate at high speed, keeping the weapon going until he no longer felt the grasping rusted hands of his attackers. "That's it," he glared at the rest of the horde, already beginning to advance to fill the gap he'd created, and called up a new weapon, "no more Mr. Nice Guy. ASTRO CRUSH!"

The Astro Crush put a more sizable dent in the horde, but there was still a great many more of the robots to fight before things were over, and Mega Man unleashed a Thunder Beam through their ranks even as he wondered if his master weapon energy would hold out long enough to thin their ranks.

"And thin the horde of Zombie Joes did," Roll stated to the audience, "but they'd served their purpose. For while the rest of us would deal with the stragglers and the damage they inflicted that night, only Mega Man would face the masters of this night of terror. And with his arsenal of powers depleted, they would not prove easy foes."

Roll signaled Tango to change music again, this time a collection of seemingly upbeat tones interspersed with low eerie notes that seemed to drag on and echo in a way that made one want to check around the corners to make sure nothing was waiting. (5)

"It was poor fortune that the first of the Fear Masters he would face that night was one that none of his standard weapons could touch. For the Ghost Woman could make her body as immaterial as the clouding mist that moved in upon the city..."

Rock resisted the urge to shiver as he cautiously made his way through the fogged city streets. In stark contrast to the way the Zombie Joes had almost choked the streets, they were now eerily silent, with only the light of Jack-o-Lanterns along the sidewalk giving any indication of life.

Pn-yow

'Scratch that,' Mega Man thought as he turned and fired on the robot that had suddenly attacked him, *'only the light of METs* disguised *as Jack-o-Lanterns.'*

As if that thought had summoned it, another source of light approached his position and out of the fog came what appeared to be floating balls of ghostly blue flame with eyes.

'And creepy blue Changekeys...' Mega Man added as he opened fire on the new arrivals.

He was so focused on the threats that provided their own light that he was almost blindsided by one that wasn't. Ducking at the last moment, the blue bomber turned and fired on...

'...a mailbox? I'm being attacked by the terrain now?' he managed to blink in surprise before more objects flew out of the mist. All sorts of things that typically lined a street: Trash cans, signs, and he even spotted a fire hydrant in there.

'Okay...' Mega Man dodged the airborne threats and shot down a few, only for more to appear, *'do I stay and fight this out or–'*

"Help!" a yell from a nearby building cut off his thoughts. "Someone help!"

Without giving it a second thought, Mega Man broke away from the flying objects and ran for the building he'd heard the cry for help from. He had to dodge a few of the objects that followed him, but he made it in and slammed the door behind him. Pausing to get his

bearings, the cry came again and he turned and ran through what looked like a hotel lobby into a well decorated dining room.

"Mega Man?" the voice he'd heard asked with relief and he turned to see a young woman crouched protectively over a pair of children. "Thank goodness you're–Look out!"

Mega Man jumped forward with a great leap, turning in mid-air so as to position himself between the threat and the civilians. As he landed, he spied a female model robot hovering calmly above the door where he'd entered. She was pure white in all respects, but the only other thing truly notable about her was that her torso ended in a misting hover unit rather than legs, giving her the appearance of a ghost.

"I thought you would come if someone called for you," the girl robot lowered herself until she was just slightly higher up than the blue bomber, "and such a prompt response! Why, I didn't even have to do anything other than show myself."

"Let them go!" Mega Man demanded.

"What, you won't even ask my name?" the ghostly white robot taunted before waving her arm at which the doors at the other end of the room opened of their own accord. "I suppose they can leave, provided *you* stay and face me."

"We don't have to fight–"

"Oh, but we do," Mega Man's opponent grinned as the woman and the children ran out the opened doors before she gestured, causing all of the room's exits to slam shut behind them. "After all, I am the Ghost Woman of the Fear Masters, and we are here to claim the city and all in it as our playthings. And I know big strong heroes like you can't let sweet little ghouls like us alone to have our fun..."

"I'll stop you," Mega Man's eyes narrowed as he brought his Mega Buster to bear and fired, only for his eyes to widen as Ghost Woman

went translucent and his shot passed right through her to impact the wall behind.

"No," Ghost Woman grinned impossibly wide as she raised her arms, at which every single object in the room; tables, chairs, everything not nailed down; rose up as well, "but I'll have *so* much fun watching you try."

"Man, wouldn't it be cool if Mega Man had a proton pack like in that movie?" one of the kids, this one wearing black ninja pajamas, interrupted.

"Yeah!" another in red ninja pajamas agreed. "Then he wouldn't need to be afraid of no Ghost Woman!" (6)

"Funny," Roll smirked, taking the interruption in stride, "that's almost precisely what was going through my brother's mind right then..."

If Auto ever again tries to build a working proton pack for Halloween, I promise to ask dad to help instead of stopping him,' Mega Man swore as he desperately dodged the thick swarm of flying objects.

"Poor little boy blue..." Ghost Woman simpered as she glided alongside through the seemingly chaotic storm of objects with ease, "so dedicated to doing the 'right thing' when it never amounts to anything in the end. You fight so hard just for the 'villain' to get away, you 'believe' in people only for the number of enemies you have to keep rising, and those you waste your life defending are a single excuse from turning on you." She reached out and brushed her now-solid hand over his cheek as he ducked and wove through a table. "It would be so much eas–"

Ghost Woman cut off as Mega Man whipped around to grab the solid appendage. She turned intangible again, but not quite fast enough to prevent him from using his Copy Chip on her.

"Thank you for that!" he called out as he went translucent, allowing the storm of objects to simply pass through him now.

"Not bad," Ghost Woman allowed as she grinned, "but your stolen ability won't last forever, you still can't hurt me while I can hurt you, because I am–"

"–using modified METs to control the flying furniture," Mega Man finished, causing Ghost Woman to blink in shock.

"How...?"

"You want an answer, you'll have to catch me!" the blue bomber grinned cheekily and ran towards the wall of the room, phasing straight through it as he left.

"I... what... YOU DO *NOT* GET TO RUN FROM *ME* !" the spectral Fear Master shrieked like a banshee as she took off after her opponent in a blind rage.

She also phased through the wall, slipping through air and solid objects as if they were no more substantial than mist before emerging onto the street where Mega Man was waiting for her and fired...

...so high and wide that Ghost Woman couldn't help but stop and blink.

"Are you serious?! I didn't even need to be intangible for that one! Where's the legendary her–" Ghost Woman's shrieks cut off as she spied a sputtering light approaching her from the side and turned to look at it, her eyes widening in shock. "Oh *SCHHHWWAAAAAAAAARRRRRRKKKK!*"

The moment the sparking end of the severed power line intersected her intangible form, the electrical surge forced her back into a tangible state and proceeded to fry her systems until her blank-eyed husk fell to the street with a dull clunk.

"When the lines are down, don't you hang around. When lines are down don't you hang around," a younger child in a lovingly handmade Louie the Lightningbug (7) costume began singing after Roll finished describing Ghost Woman's defeat.

"I–" Roll suppressed a giggle, "I never thought of that before, but yes, she'd have been smart to play it safe, wouldn't she?"

"That's all?" another kid in a dog costume whined, "I thought this was gonna be epic..."

"Have you forgotten?" Roll tsked fondly. "Masters always come in sets of eight. That Halloween night was far from over."

"Did Rush track the others down?" the dog kid interrupted again.

"Unfortunately, no," Roll shook her head as Tango switched tracks again to an upbeat country tune, but one that gave the feeling of a friendly warning against danger that the giver knew would be ignored. (8) "He told me later that he tried to call Rush and the rest of us, but all he got was static. Despite the power not being out, he couldn't even access the teleportation network. But my brother never had any issues finding trouble. After all, trouble liked to find him more often than not..."

"Dr. Light, do you copy?" Mega Man tried his communicator again, getting only static in reply. "Mega Woman? Proto Man? Quake Woman? Dr. Cossack? Dr. Lalinde? This is Mega Man sending out a general alert, is there anyone at all out there who can read me?"

Nothing but static.

'What in the world is going on?' he thought as he made his way back into the hotel to see if he could check on the woman and her children. *'First Rush doesn't respond to my signal, then my teleporter*

can't get a lock on the relay system, and now I'm cut off from communications...?'

He passed through the dining room, noting the unhelmeted MET units he'd spotted on the furniture wandering around looking as confused as he felt. Activating the sit-rep shades he rarely used, he spotted the heat trail the woman and her children had left and made to follow it. Seeking out those he knew had been in danger and making sure they were fine would be a better use of his time than wandering around aimlessly in the fog hoping to find something he wasn't even sure was out there.

"Ma'am?" he offered as he closed in on a trio of heat signatures. Odd, their biometrics looked a little strange... "It's me, Mega Man. I just wanted to make sure you and your children were alright now that the threat has been neutralized."

Instead of a vocal reply, the largest heat signature began prowling towards him on all fours, which looked strange from a human-shaped figure. As the other two moved to join it, he heard a throaty growl that had more in common with a canine than anything human vocal chords typically produced. Blinking in confusion, Mega Man retracted his shades to get a proper visual and started in shock at the sight.

It was indeed the woman and her children from before, but there was no sign of human intelligence in their eyes. Instead there was a look of feral aggression complemented by the woman's bared teeth that displayed her enlarged canines and he wasn't completely sure, but the three seemed a fair bit hairier than he recalled.

'That's what I was seeing on the scanners,' he thought to himself as he began to back away from the three as they continued to stalk towards him, all of them now growling not unlike Treble when he was guarding Bass, *'higher brain functions impaired, heightened aggression, unnatural adrenaline levels... What* happened *to them while I was fighting Ghost Woman?!'*

Right before he was expecting them to pounce, which would prove a real problem to not hurting them, the woman reared back her head and let out a long keening howl.

"AAAARRRRROOOOOooooooooooo...!" the incredible imitation of a wolf howl made at least half the room jump, especially since it wasn't Roll that had made it. As one, heads turned every which way to find the source before settling on a young girl in a werewolf costume topped with a red hood and grinning with total satisfaction for what she'd just done. (9)

"Just like that," Roll managed to smile without breaking out in laughter at the looks on everyone's faces.

"Why was Mega Man scared?" a kid dressed like the grim reaper, his mask off, piped up. "He coulda taken 'em!"

"Perhaps," Roll agreed hastily before an argument on the matter could start, "but life is precious to all of my family and friends, human and robot alike, but to my brother most of all. He hates hurting others, even the robots he fights he takes great pains to preserve their IC chips that contain their minds and personalities. Perhaps he could have beaten those three, but not without hurting them. And my brother would *never* do something to hurt an innocent person, much less a woman and her children if there was *any* other choice..."

Mega Man grunted as he dodged a clawed swipe. He'd fled the berserk woman and her children just fine, but just when he'd lost them, he'd run into what looked like a few Gilliam Knights in wolf mode, their claws dripping with some unknown substance that he suspected might have been what triggered the feral rage in the woman and her children. They were also backed up by a couple of those Jack-o-Lantern METs and a few more ferally affected humans in the mix. With just enough of a hole in the fog that the full moon could be seen overhead.

As he fired on the robot, he tried to plot an escape route. The robots were not a big problem, but the addition of the affected humans changed things. If he didn't pick his shots carefully, there was a very real chance that he'd hit one of them instead of his actual targets.

Of course, right as he began to formulate a plan all of his opponents paused and looked up before suddenly turning and running.

'I'm almost afraid to look,' the blue bomber hesitated, but did so anyway. Just in time to dodge out of the way of a massive object right before impact. An object that stood up to reveal itself as a giant Monking that began to beat its chest aggressively.

"I do not have time for this..." Mega Man grit his teeth before he began charging up his Mega Buster. The 'Monking Kong' seemed to sense the imminent attack because it swung one of its arms wide and tore a chunk out of a nearby building, flinging debris at Mega Man.

The blue bomber jumped back, dodging the debris even as he noted the snapped rebar sticking out of a few larger pieces. Snapped in such a way that getting hit with it would probably be just as bad as if he'd jumped on some of those spikes Wily liked to line his fortress with.

Another such deluge of debris came from the other side and Mega Man dodged that as well while he waited for an opening. An opening that came when his massive opponent decided to try punching him directly instead of flinging debris. Mega Man dodged backwards and jumped forwards again at the moment of impact to begin running up the robotic ape's arm. 'Monking Kong' roared in surprise and tried to swat the blue bomber off of himself, only for Mega Man to slide forward at the last moment resulting in the robo-ape merely damaging itself heavily. As the metal simian reeled from the damage, the blue bomber jumped up and shot the giant robot in the eye with his fully charged Mega Buster.

The crash of the massive inert form muffled Mega Man's own landing, but as the blue bomber began to take stock a rhythmic clapping sound emerged from the fog.

"But it was really the sound of metal claws on the street as the robot wolves came back, right?" one of the children, a girl in a black leotard and cat-themed facepaint, piped up.

"No way!" a kid who had formerly been wearing a sheet with eyeholes yelled back. "She said it was clapping, so that's what it was! Probably the robot master making his appearance!"

"Actually, you're both right," Roll grinned. "Because out of the fog came a robot with armor like a navy suit with a white shirt, complete with red tie, with a brown wolf's head and clawed hands and feet to match. And right behind him came a pack of Gilliam Wolves and 'werewolfied' humans..." (10)

"Bravo, hunter in blue," the wolf-themed robot master applauded mockingly as the robot wolves and affected humans spread out in a ring that encompassed them both as well as the debris that 'Monking Kong' had strewn over the area, "bravo. I see that your reputation is well deserved."

"Wolf Man, I presume?" Mega Man returned evenly, getting a nod. "Are you so afraid to fight me one-on-one?"

"Hmm? Oh, them?" Wolf Man grinned as he crouched down on all fours, not unlike Slash Man sometimes did. "They're not here to help me fight. They're here to make sure you don't run."

That was all the warning Mega Man had before his opponent shot forward like a bullet, claws out to rend deep into the hero's armor. Mega Man jumped, turned, lined up his shot and fired only for Wolf Man to easily sidestep the blast and charge again. It went that way for several passes. Wolf Man charged, Mega Man barely dodged

before taking aim and firing on his opponent who easily evaded and began the cycle again.

"But Miss Roll!" a child in a pig costume protested. "I thought you said Mega Man didn't want to risk hurting anyone! Weren't there a bunch of sick people surrounding them?"

"There were," Roll nodded. "And there were also a bunch of the Gilliam Wolves that had been spreading the sickness. That's why my brother took aim before every shot. He wasn't aiming for Wolf Man–"

"He was shooting the bad robots that made all the people sick!" a second child in a pig costume interrupted excitedly, Roll nodding in confirmation.

"But... what happened when there weren't any more bad robots left?" a third of the same asked.

"That's a good question, and one my brother was about to learn the answer to..."

"Ha!" Wolf Man barked in laughter, "you're even better than I'd heard, hunter. Taking out all of my robot minions like that."

"Yeah, and now they can't poison anyone else!"

"But I can..." Wolf Man growled in amusement. "After all, I'm the source of the drug that turns any human into a wild beast. And now that the warm-up is over, it's time to really get wild!"

This time when Mega Man dodged the Fear Master's charge, Wolf Man turned sharply and fired his claws at Mega Man who twisted out of the way on reflex, only to freeze at the all-too-human yelp of pain behind him.

"That's fighting dirty!" one of the older children, amusingly dressed like Roll's own older brother, complained.

"Oh, really?" Roll arched an eyebrow. "And when my brother was doing the same thing earlier?"

"That's... that's different..." the kid mumbled.

"Besides, as my brother would learn many times that night, the Fear Masters didn't care about fighting fair. But then, that was hardly anything new for him..."

"Hehehe..." Wolf Man chuckled ferally as he prowled around Mega Man like a predator looking for the best moment to pounce, the blue bomber backing up in the general direction of the debris from the earlier fight with the giant Monking. "Now you see how hopeless it is... If you try to shoot me, you might hit them instead, but if you dodge my claws, I might hit them anyway. All you can do is sit there and take it..."

Wolf Man punctuated this claim by firing his claws again, grinning as they dug into Mega Man's side when he didn't bother dodging.

"Maybe..." Mega Man moved into a martial arts stance, "or maybe we can finish this up close and personal..."

"He..." Wolf Man chuckled. "HAHAHAHAHA! Such bravado even when staring death in the face! You really are everything I've heard of! So be it! If you want to die with my teeth in your throat then you shall!"

Wolf Man shot forward in a lunge, arms and jaws spread wide, and slammed into Mega Man who grappled with his opponent even as the force knocked him off his feet. And then, to Wolf Man's surprise, he turned immaterial, phasing through the debris that had been behind him even as Wolf Man impaled himself on the sharpened rebar.

"ooooooooooooo..." several children winced in chorus.

"What's Ghost Woman's weapon called anyway?" one of them asked.

"Matter Phase," Roll replied, "which let him move through solid objects. Wolf Man's was called the Wolf Claw which would produce sharpened claws on the ends of his fingers for close combat that could also be fired as projectiles."

"What happened to the people who'd been wolfified?" another asked. "Were they okay?"

"They were," Roll assured the kids. "Wolf Man's drug was made to react to a special radio signal that only he himself transmitted. So when he went down, they all snapped out of it. But the night was far from over, for shortly after he made sure everyone was fine, he heard a pipe organ in the distance playing a very famous tune, inviting him to the lair of his next opponent."

Nearly everyone in the room recognized the ominous, yet refined, tune, even if they didn't know the origin as Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. (11)

"And while Wolf Man was a dirty fighter, he was downright honorable compared to some of his fellow Fear Masters..."

Mega Man watched the fog part to reveal a massive mansion ahead of him that he could hear the eerie pipe organ music emanate from. The wrought iron gate swung open at his arrival as a pair of crow-like Cyorowns laughed mockingly from the top of the gateposts.

Stepping through, he saw a swarm of Battons emerge from the house and head towards his direction. As they got closer, he noted that their wings were green instead of red and that they had oversized fangs in their mouths.

'Vampiric Succubattons... Of course...' the blue bomber sighed as he began running for the front door, blasting away at those that tried to divebomb him and suck his energy out. That was about the last thing he needed right now.

Keeping the swarm off of him was difficult, but Mega Man somehow managed to make it inside the front door (ignoring the shots from the pair of Jack-o-METs on the porch in his haste) and slam it behind him before any of the vampiric bat-robots could latch onto him. Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of his troubles as a robot designed for the opera, complete with partial white facemask suddenly appeared in front of him with a swirl of its cape and attacked.

"Was his name Phantom Man?" a boy dressed like the eponymous Phantom himself interrupted from the back.

"No, he was just a Phantom," Roll shook her head. "A human-shaped robot with mild cloaking and short-range teleportation designed primarily for theater work. Capable of surprising my brother, but otherwise not a threat. The true master of the mansion was further inside past a few more obstacles..."

A few more of the Phantoms had jumped out, but after the first surprise, Mega Man had figured out how to deal with them and the large foyer was now clear. The ceiling was at least two floors up and there was a large balcony directly across from the front door with winding staircases leading up to it on either side.

The flapping of metallic wings interrupted the blue bomber's respite and he sighed.

'Clear of everything but the Battons that didn't move until right now...'

The thankfully normal Battons began to unfold from their perches on the ceiling and congregate in the middle of the room in a mass. Almost as if...

'Seriously?!' Mega Man yelled internally as the Battons merged into a single Big Batton. The massive winged robot glared at the blue bomber and growled before giving a large flap of its wings to surge forward in an attempt to crush the smaller robot. Mega Man slid out of the way with plenty of time to spare and turned as the Big Batton smashed into the floor and broke into the swarm of smaller Battons.

Understanding what was going on, Mega Man began to fire repeatedly on the swarm before it merged together again and by the time it had, the Big Batton had lost almost half of its mass. The now smaller form gave an angry screech and tried to fire on Mega Man a few times before attempting to crush him under its bulk again, only for the blue bomber to evade every time and begin firing on the individual Battons when it once more broke apart. This time, when they tried to re-form there weren't enough of them left to pull it off, so they tried to rush Mega Man instead and were shot down in the attempt.

"Marvelous," a voice declared in a blank tone, "simply marvelous."

Mega Man turned to look at the figure on the indoor balcony. He seemed to be an adult male human, finely dressed, but with a somewhat blank expression and a disturbingly pale pallor.

"Our master awaits you, blue one," the man intoned, "best not keep him waiting."

Mega Man cautiously ascended the staircase, wary of possible traps, but he arrived before the man completely unhindered. Looking at the man, he verified that he was indeed human, if unnaturally pale and with eyes so bloodshot they appeared red.

"Follow me," the man spoke formally with his blank tone, and Mega Man caught a glimpse of what seemed to be sharp elongated canines, before turning and walking through the double doors at the back of the balcony.

"Who is your master?" Mega Man inquired diplomatically as he followed the man down the large hallway.

"Our master is the count of the night," the man replied readily as if reciting a memorized fact. "He is the mighty lord next to whom mere humans and ordinary robots are as cattle. I and my family are honored to have had our eyes opened to this fact and permitted into his service as his children of the night."

Mega Man grew more alarmed as the man spoke, wondering what terrible power his mysterious foe possessed to cause someone to act this way. The music he'd been hearing grew ever louder as he was led to the far end of the hall. The man opened the doors dramatically and the music suddenly halted.

Across the room, seated at a pipe organ that had clearly been playing the music, a figure in a high-collared floor-length cape stood. The man who had guided Mega Man to the room moved to stand with a similarly pale woman and two equally pale children that stood like statues to the side of the instrument.

"Master, the blue one has arrived," the man bowed before becoming as still as the rest of his family, calmly observing events with unblinking eyes.

"Excellent, my child," the caped figure replied with a stereotypical Transylvanian accent before turning around, allowing Mega Man to behold a pale-faced robot with armor styled after a Victorian-era nobleman, carefully groomed black hair, crimson optics, and vampire fangs. "Welcome blue one," the robot bowed dramatically, "I am Dracu Man, vampire extraordinaire, count of the night, and your new master."

Silence and gaping mouths abounded as the total audacity of that statement sunk in. (12)

"But... but Mega Man would never work for a guy like that!" a kid dressed like one of the Ghostbusters suddenly cried. "Right?"

"Not willingly," Roll agreed, "but Dracu Man didn't intend on giving my brother a choice in the matter..."

"What?" Mega Man blinked in confusion. There had to be an error in his auditory processors. He couldn't have *possibly* heard that right.

"Must I spell it out for you?" Dracu Man sighed theatrically. "You now serve me. You do everything I say from this moment until I deem otherwise."

"And... why in the world would I do that?"

"My children of the night!" Dracu Man commanded with a snap of his fingers.

"Yes, master?" all the enspelled members of the family that likely owned this house replied as one.

"I have decided to grant you a boon," Dracu Man continued. "You shall learn the ways of the vampires you have become by feasting upon blood this night. Starting with each other. Do not be afraid, for as vampires you are immune to pain and death. Show our guest the power and vitality of the vampire."

"Of course, master," the four intoned before turning suddenly hungry gazes upon each other. (13)

" *No!* Wait!" Mega Man cried in protest.

"Hold, my children," Dracu Man commanded, raising his hand to halt their impending actions, "the blue one wishes to speak."

"Even if I agree now, you know I'll never knowingly hurt someone," the blue bomber ground his teeth in fury. "What do you hope to gain

from this?"

"Why, you of course," Dracu Man chuckled as Mega Man stared him defiantly in the eyes. "And you shall find that you will indeed follow my every command. Loyally. Skillfully. Even eagerly. All that you must do first..."

Mega Man kept his gaze focused even as Dracu Man's eyes began to pulse in rhythm, flashes of light emanating from behind them in time with the cadence of his voice. Powerfully... Compellingly... Hypnotically...

"...is look into my eyes. You are under my spell. You are no longer the famed warrior of peace. You are now one of the savage children of the night, bound to foll–GAH!"

Mega Man had moved suddenly, darting forward with feral efficiency as his hands morphed into razor-sharp wolf claws, and slashed at Dracu Man's face. The Fear Master had moved to block, only for Mega Man to dig one clawed hand into the blocking arm and tear a gash in Dracu Man's armor with the other, the force of the blow knocking the Fear Master out of his grip.

"How is this possible?!" Dracu Man hissed as he jumped back from the unexpected assault. "You should be one of my loyal vampires!"

"You said I was a savage child of the night," Mega Man growled out like a wild animal. "Never a vampire."

With that, the now savage blue bomber lunged at his opponent again, claws flashing.

"Booyah!" a 'wolf boy' off to the side yelled. "Werewolves rule vampires drool!"

"I don't know about real ones," Roll snickered at the faces of a few nearby kids who had dressed up like vampires, "but my brother got

lucky that the Wolf Claw was in fact Dracu Man's weakness. Unfortunately, Dracu Man still had a few underhanded tricks up his sleeve..."

"Aid me, my children of the night!" Dracu Man commanded and the family of hypnotized humans sprung into action with surprising speed, latching onto Mega Man's frame while their master backed away from the savage opponent.

"You..." Mega Man growled, a clawed hand pointed in Dracu Man's direction even as his better nature came through the hypnosis and prevented him from throwing the humans off and likely injuring them severely. "You cowardly little..."

"The wise lord uses all tools at his disposal," Dracu Man got to his feet, holding a rent that Mega Man's Wolf Claws had torn in his armor. "It is not cowardly to claim victory by any means necessary. Now... Look into my eyes..."

"I'd rather claw them out..." Mega Man growled as he activated the ranged firing option for the claws on the hand pointed at Dracu Man.

"I won't go into the details," Roll stage whispered, "but suffice to say that Dracu Man didn't find the Wolf Claws very appetizing."

"Eeeeewwww..." several children made disgusted faces.

"What happened next?" a girl dressed like a witch asked while cuddling a plush black cat. "Did that family turn back to normal?"

"They did," Roll nodded. "With Dracu Man neutralized, his hypnotic spell over them was broken."

There was a chorus of relieved sighs around the room, only to be reminded of how much there was to go when the song changed again to an enticing tune. One that the adults in the room might even

call sultry and seductive, but with a definite undertone of danger. A tune for something whose attractiveness was matched only by how dangerous it was. (14)

"But the next Fear Master was about to make herself known," Roll forged ahead, "and the Witch Woman was bound and determined to put my brother under her spell. *Permanently* ..."

"How can we ever thank you, Mega Man?" the owner of the house, his pale pallor regaining color now that Dracu Man's influence was gone, gushed as he vigorously shook the robot's hand. "To think what that... beastly creature might have made us do... His promises that our actions would cause no lasting harm seemed so *reasonable* after all and..."

"Think nothing of it," the blue bomber replied humbly. "All in a day's work."

Inside, Mega Man was as shaken up as the man seemed to be. Being made into a more violent version of himself... the loss of self-control never failed to rattle him. He always wondered if the next time would be the one. The one where he'd finally lose all semblance of restraint and hurt someone.

"Oh-hohohohoho...!" a woman's cackling laughter pierced the scene. Mega Man immediately stepped between the man and the perceived source of the sound and scanned the room. His eyes eventually settled on a robot cat, colored entirely black save for its eerie green optics. "How absolutely *precious* !" the voice continued from the robo-feline's speakers. "I simply *must* have you for my own!"

"Who are you?" Mega Man challenged. "What do you want?"

"I am the Witch Woman, my dashing hero, speaking through my dear Tama Kuro here," the voice became low and throaty, "and after that *incredible* display, I have decided that I want you."

"Sorry, not interested."

"Oh, really?" the voice tittered. "Not even for them?"

At this, the sound shifted and breathless groans could be heard. Human groans. "Please... the heat... need... cold..."

"Though I suppose if you won't come, I'll just have to content myself with their cries of anguish."

"Over my dead body!" Mega Man snarled, part of him wondering if there was some lingering effects of the hypnosis in his system.

"While I'd prefer you intact and operational," the voice cooed, "I suppose a woman must take what she can get. To find me, just follow my dear Tama Kuro, and do hurry my darling hero. There's no telling what I might do if you let me become bored! *mwa!*"

"Oooohh, I bet Mega Man was *mad* ..." a boy in the front wearing a vaguely Victorian costume with plastic bits painted to look like brass machinery grinned.

"He was *furious* ," Roll confirmed, "which wasn't good news for Witch Woman's minions that got in his way..."

Part of Mega Man's mind idly noted the female-themed minions Witch Woman had attacking him. That part was already labeling the crow-themed harpy robots as Harpyorowns and due to the Mini-Snakeys attached to their heads, the serpent women had been dubbed 'Snakeygons'.

Most of his mind, on the other hand, was focused on blasting his way through them as quickly as possible so he could rescue the humans being kept captive and in danger.

Sidestepping the razor-sharp metal feathers a Harpyorown threw in his direction, Mega Man began charging another buster shot as he waited for the Snakeygon to give him an opening. However, the Harpyorown took exception to being ignored and dove at him, talons outstretched even as the Snakeygon fired her petrification ray. Sliding out of the way, Mega Man avoided the beam which instead hit the Harpyorown and unleashed his charged shot at the Snakeygon who collapsed, the Mini-Snakeys that made up her hair detaching and slithering towards him. However, a quick burst of the Hypnotic Gaze that he'd gotten from Dracu Man and the tiny robots turned their hostility on the Harpyorown instead, leaving the way clear for him to continue pursuit of Tama Kuro who had run into the mall.

Who had apparently halted his progress just inside, waiting patiently in the empty mall area with only his metal tail showing any movement and the lights from Jack-o-Lanterns at every storefront the only illumination.

"As much as I love watching you work," the voice of Witch Woman purred, "I think you've got a little too much frustration left to work through before we meet. So I insist you play with Tama Kuro for a bit first."

Mega Man was wondering just what that meant when the black robot cat began to grow. And grow. Until he was as large as one of the feline Tama robots that usually served under Top Man.

"RRROOOOOWWWRRR!" the beast yowled in a way that caused the walls to shake and the Jack-o-Lanterns to jump in place.

Actually, no, the yowl had just signaled the Jack-o-METs that had been hiding themselves to begin closing in.

"Alright..." Mega Man growled right back as he activated the Wolf Claw weapon. "You want me to work out some frustration, here I come!"

With that, he charged forward even as Tama Kuro opened its mouth and spat a giant 'yarn' ball at him which he promptly swiped his claws at, sending it back into the robo-cat's face. Tame Kuro yowled as the closest Jack-o-METs moved to intercept the blue bomber, only to be cut down by the Wolf Claws both from melee slashes and ranged projectile shots. Tama Kuro recovered just in time to get clawed in the face as Mega Man unleashed his frustration at being kept from saving people on the servant of Witch Woman. In short order, the black robot cat was flung back, shrinking to its previous size by the time it hit the ground.

"My, my," the voice of Witch Woman seemed surprised as her familiar limped to its feet, much worse for wear, but still functional, "aren't we impatient."

"No more games, Witch Woman," Mega Man demanded. "Take me to where you're keeping those people!"

"But of course," the sound of snapping fingers was heard and a portion of the mall lit up in the distance, beckoning Mega Man onwards.

The blue bomber ran forwards, leaving Tama Kuro behind and paying just enough heed to the remaining Jack-o-METs to dodge their shots. Soon enough, he'd arrived to the lit area, only to see nothing there.

"Show yourself!" he yelled. "Stop tormenting those people with fire right now!"

"Fire?" the voice of Witch Woman, no longer distorted by being broadcast laughed as another fingersnap was heard, heralding the illumination of an area off to the side where several people huddled close together in a pale blue light, mist hanging over them like they were in a freezer.

"Please... Give us the heat... Need warmth... It's so cold..."

"Fire is *sooo* passe, darling hero," Witch Woman simpered as she floated down from above on a hovering broom. "Don't you know that ice is what's in this season?"

"Was she ugly?" a younger girl in a fairy costume asked.

"Yeah, bad witches are ugly, right?" an older girl in a princess costume, possibly the other's sister, added.

"Actually," Roll corrected with a smile, "Witch Woman was very beautiful."

"Was she green?" a boy in a puffy Yellow Devil costume (with his head as the 'eye') piped up.

"No, no she wasn't," Roll laughed. "As I said, she was as beautiful as she was evil. Had she been a better person, I might have even tried setting her and my brother up. Dressed all in black, with eerie green eyes, smooth pale skin, raven hair, ruby lips, and sparks that flew from her fingertips..." (15)

"I'd tell you to just stand still and make this painless, but I do so love the feisty ones," Witch Woman leered as icy blue sparks danced over her hands.

"Then you'll *adore* me," Mega Man shot back along with a spread of buster shots.

"But I already *do* , darling hero," the robotic witch fanned herself dramatically with one hand as the other sent out a wave of cold that made the plasma bolts dissipate when they struck it. "I don't ask much," the leer turned malicious as she pointed her hand at her opponent, "just that you stick around for a Cold Spell."

The frosty bolt that shot forth plowed through Mega Man's buster shots with ease and he barely managed to dodge out of the way.

"You're fast, I like that," Witch Woman crooned as she floated higher on her broom and began to circle overhead, moving just fast enough to keep out of her opponent's sights as he tried to track her. "But do be careful not to slip and fall, my darling hero."

Mega Man easily evaded the large downward bolt of freezing energy, but the wave that rushed across the floor caught him by surprise and sent him tumbling. He tried to stand, only to find his systems were running sluggish and his feet began to slip on the now icy floor.

"Such a pity," Witch Woman sighed as she descended to the floor and began to form a ball of icy blue sparks in her hand pointed straight at Mega Man, "I'd hoped to have some more fun before ending this, but it seems you just can't keep up."

As the freezing bolt left her hand, Mega Man switched to the Wolf Claw and dug one hand into the icy floor to throw himself to the side while he aimed the other at his opponent and fired the razor-sharp projectiles.

Despite any surprise at the maneuver, the mechanical spellcaster still sidestepped the shots enough to escape damage, but one still carved a shallow cut across her cheek.

"Oh, she must have been mad," a young boy in a scarecrow costume cut in.

"How so?" Roll blinked at the assumption.

"Don't pretty ladies always get angry if you mess up their looks?"

"Depends on the individual and the situation," Roll answered diplomatically. "Some can get very angry while others can be much more calm about it. As for Witch Woman, well," Roll fished for a way to describe this to the gathered youth that wouldn't get her in trouble with their parents, "she was... a little different..."

" *Exquisite* ," Witch Woman lovingly traced the injury as she gazed at the recovering Mega Man. "To use your claws to gain purchase on the ice, especially impaired as you must be? And to injure *me* , no matter how slight?" At this, Witch Woman dismounted her broom even as the temporary freezing of the floor ended and clutched it in a combat stance. "Truly you are a fine hero and I want you all the more now."

That was all the warning the true blue hero had before Witch Woman dashed forward with speed comparable to Wolf Man's, sending one of her Cold Spell bolts ahead of her even as she wound up for a melee strike.

Mega Man sidestepped and tried to swipe with the Wolf Claws, only to be stopped by his opponent's broom which then used his own hand as a fulcrum to twist and slam into his chin in a rising strike that lifted him off his feet.

'Ow...' the blue bomber winced as he fell back, twisting his arms to turn his momentum into a recovering handstand, *'I think she hits harder than Roll...'*

"Really?" a girl in the front blinked owlishly, complemented by the fact that she was in fact dressed as an owl. "She was stronger than you?"

"Maybe," Roll allowed with a wink. "I do tend to pull my strikes a bit when I spar with my brother after all. Actually, those sparring sessions might have been what let him last as long as he did..."

Mega Man wasn't sure how he was going to get out of this one. He might have been able to turn a ranged game into a stalemate given what he'd seen earlier, but close range he was getting his butt handed to him. Nearly every attempt to hit her was blocked by the broom and he was having a hard time evading the counter-strikes.

And the glancing blows he did land just seemed to send her even deeper into her crazed frenzy.

And that wasn't counting the freezing energy she was starting to throw around increasingly liberally.

"That's it!" Witch Woman declared with glee as he managed to scratch her leg right before forcing him on the defensive. "Yes!" a leading bolt of cold was sidestepped and the following broom jab deflected. "Yes! the upward strike was blocked. "Yes!" the spinning blow caught only air as the target backstepped. "Yes!" the spin continued into a sweeping strike that was hopped over. "Yes!" Witch Woman abruptly stopped her spin and jabbed the unbristled end of her broom into Mega Man's torso. "YES!" the blow was followed by a massive bolt of freezing energy that blew the mechanical hero backwards to skid along the ground. (16)

Mega Man grit his teeth as he painfully forced his now sluggish body to a kneeling posture so he could try to stand before–

He'd just raised his head to look at his opponent when the second Cold Spell slammed home and froze him in place.

–before that happened...

"Oh, you are the *best* , my darling hero," Witch Woman stalked forward like a cat about to pounce on a mouse. She reached the blue bomber well before the effect could wear off and knelt down just far enough that she could cup his chin in one hand while still staring down into his eyes as her other hand began to emit more icy sparks to charge up another large Cold Spell. "Mmmmm... I shall always remember this every time I look into your frozen helpless eyes..."

'Look into my eyes?' Mega Man's analytical mind latched onto that statement as he felt himself regain control over the variable weapon system and his voicebox. *'I wonder...'*

"Yes..." he forced out, getting a surprised blink from his opponent as he switched to Dracu Man's Hypnotic Gaze and focused it into his optics, "look... into my eyes..."

"I shall, my darling hero," Witch Woman kept her gaze locked on his, "my living eyes forever on your frozen ones."

"How...?"

"Oh, so simple my heroic statue," the female Fear Master replied readily, "when I unleash this charged Cold Spell, your functions will freeze forevermore. Forever locked as my lovely trophy, free for me to admire."

"How can you be... sure it will work?"

"Oh, my darling hero," Witch Woman gazed straight into the strong gaze of her defeated opponent, "at this point, my spell could freeze even my systems."

"Are you certain?" she could almost feel his arm caressing hers, but that was silly. He was frozen in place, waiting for her final blow. "Is it really that strong?"

"You doubt me, my darling hero?" she reached up to tickle his chin tauntingly as she continued to stare upwards into those strong eyes. This was an even better pose for him to have than the kneeling one.

"Not at all," Mega Man replied as he gently moved the arm with the readied weapon so that it was pointed at Witch Woman herself instead of him. "But why don't you show me anyway?"

"Anything you say, my prize," Witch Woman grinned as she obliviously unleashed her spell on herself.

"Woah..." several members of the audience gaped with wide eyes. Not all of them were children either.

"But didn't you say that Mega Man doesn't like to kill even bad guys?" a girl who had decided that being in a wheelchair was the perfect excuse to dress as a mermaid (complete with water decals on the chair itself) chimed.

"He doesn't," Roll nodded. "But if he has to choose between sparing an opponent or saving innocent lives, there's little doubt which one he'll choose every time. With the fall of Witch Woman, her chilling spell that held her hostages captive was lifted and my brother was able to move them somewhere they could begin warming up. But he would soon find out that there were still many more people that the Fear Masters were seeking to harm in cruel ways. For he was about to discover a terrible curse," the statement was punctuated by a change in music, this time to a tune that spoke of ancient tombs and the dark and terrible secrets that lay in wait for those foolish enough to enter. (17) "The curse... of the Mummy Man..."

It had taken a few minutes, but Mega Man had gotten the freezing humans to a safe place where they could begin warming up. He'd pilfered a few electric heaters and blankets from one of the stores, leaving a note for the proprietors summarizing the situation and asking them to contact Light Labs for any necessary compensation. He'd done the same with the food court after collecting some of the bottled water (a fresh unopened shipment, not from the refrigerator) there.

"Thank you, Mega Man..." one of the men he'd rescued, a doctor of medicine apparently, said as the robot finished handing out blankets. "I don't think we can ever thank you enou–"

The sound of something falling over cut the man off and everyone went silent and listened as the sound of something stumbling in their general direction was heard.

"Wait here," Mega Man told them, "I'll check it out."

Carefully exiting the secured room, Mega Man cautiously edged out towards the source of the sounds in the darkened general mall area. The sounds also seemed to be coming towards him, though he couldn't be sure if that was deliberate or coincidence. So he waited and watched as a human-sized figure stumbled into his view, apparently bumping into things in the insufficient light, and let out a sigh of relief as he noted the police uniform.

"Excuse me, officer?" he called out, watching as the figure turned towards him in the low light, "I'm Mega Man and I was wondering if..."

The blue bomber trailed off as the policeman's face became illuminated enough for him to see what had befallen the poor individual. The sunken eyes, the shriveled dry skin, the way the uniform hung loose and ill-fitting on his frame.

The man reached out a dangerously thin arm towards Mega Man and gasped out his plea in a raspy voice. "Wa...water...!"

"Ohmygod!" the interrupting gasp wasn't from one of the children this time, but one of the adult nurses in the room. "He called the hospital, right?"

"He tried," Roll explained, "but not successfully. Fortunately, as I said, one of the people rescued from Witch Woman was a medical doctor and knew what to do when the man was brought to him. As it happened, the man was so desperate for water that Mega Man needed to use one of the blankets to restrain him so that he didn't drink too much."

"Why?" a child dressed as a firefighter asked. "If he was thirsty, why stop him from drinking all the water he wanted?"

"Because if you drink too much too fast when you're too thirsty, you can just make yourself even more sick," Roll explained to nods from the medical staff present. "And that man was desperate enough that

he'd have guzzled water until he burst like a balloon before realizing anything was wrong. That's why hospitals exist, so sick people don't accidentally hurt themselves trying to get better. In any case, the policeman was just one of many who had been affected in this way, but my brother was able to get some directions towards the one responsible and set out immediately, though what he found was not at all what anyone would have expected..."

Mega Man had encountered a few more of the 'living mummified' humans on his way. The good news was that it seemed the emergency response teams were starting to make their rounds now so he'd been able to both make sure those people would receive treatment, but also send a team to pick up the rescuees from the mall.

The bad news was that he'd heard from those same emergency responders that there were other problems still going on. The reports of injuries from 'feral human' attacks were all after the fact, thankfully, so it seemed Wolf Man's influence was well and truly negated, but there were apparently people covered in grime and experiencing hallucinations and others who were in the throes of full fevered delirium. And that was in addition to riot reports and other actions typical of a panicked populace.

'Don't think about that now,' he chastised himself as he closed in on the area the policeman had mentioned. *'Let the emergency teams take care of their job. You focus on stopping those responsible. The next one should be just up ahead and... whoa...'*

Mega Man halted as he turned a corner and saw the immense structure ahead in the middle of an area strangely clear of the fog over the city. It was... there was no other word for it. It was a pyramid. A full sized pyramid apparently constructed out of metal. Junk metal if the telescopic setting of his optics wasn't mistaken. Junk metal composed of...

'Are those... Zombie Joe parts?' the blue bomber blinked in disbelief. *'Is that entire thing made out of the remains of the zombie robots I was fighting earlier?'*

"Miss Roll?" the hesitant question was accompanied by a raised hand from a boy in a Pharaoh Man costume. "How could someone make a building out of robot parts? Were there really that many of them?"

"There were," Roll answered. "Rock didn't count the number of Zombie Joes he'd faced earlier, but he said it felt as if there had been at least one for every person living in Mega City. And those were just the ones he himself faced."

"No wonder he had to empty all of his weapons," one of the other kids, this one in a wobbly Green Devil outfit, offered. "But how did the pyramid get built so fast anyway?"

"Well, Mummy Man had some help in the form of swarms of Deispiders and Sasoreenus to cement the parts together. As for gathering them, there is a sacred beetle in the Egyptian mythos known as the Scarab, or the Scarabaeus Sacer to scientists. Apparently someone had a the weird sense of humor to add a letter to the scientific name and make a robot called the Scarabaeus *Saucer* which was meant to gather up scrap metal in large balls for transport to recycling areas. Large balls that it tried to drop on my brother as he tried to approach the pyramid..." (18)

Mega Man slid into the entrance of the pyramid just before the last ball of scrapped Zombie Joe parts would have blocked it off and let out a sigh of relief. The Sasoreenus and Deispiders that were swarming around the place, apparently in the middle of constructing it were bad enough, but that scarab-themed flying saucer had been positively relentless on his approach, staying just high enough to prevent retaliation while it tried to bomb him with boulder-sized balls of scrap metal.

At least now it couldn't do that anymo–

"–ter... Pl...ease... Wa...ter..." the groans made themselves known as his audio receptors adjusted to the internal sound levels.

Mega Man's eyes widened as he took in what would at first glance appear to be silk-wrapped mummies. Stepping closer, he could see that the 'silk' was in fact a similarly-formed metallic compound Deispiders were supposed to be able to use (19) and the 'mummies' inside were in fact dangerously dehydrated humans, just like the policeman had been. So many, just lining the wall like some inhumanly macabre decorations.

"Aahh..." the groaning voice sounded throughout the makeshift tomb, "ssoo nniiccee ooff yyoouu ttoo jjooiinn mmee..."

"So, this is your doing?" the blue bomber retorted as he felt the movement of a Sasoreenu tunnelling up through the ground behind him and jumped out of the way of its attack, blasting it as it passed below.

"Ooff ccoouurrssee... Ii ggiivvee tthheemm tthhee ppeeaaccee yyoouu ddeennyy... Ttoorrmmeennttoorr ooff tthhee aazzuurree hhuuee..."

"Peace?!" Mega Man yelled at the ceiling in anger. "This is torture!"

"Nnoo... Lliivviinngg iiss ttoorrttuurree... Aa sslllooww ddeeaatthh ooff eevveerrllaassttiinngg ppaaiinn... Oonnllyy tthhee ttoommbb bbrriinnggss ppeeaaccee... Oonnllyy tthhee ttoommbb bbrriinnggss ttrruuee iimmoorrttaalliittyy..."

"Immortality?! They're dying of thirst!"

"Tthhee wwaatteerrss ooff lliiffee aarree tthhee ttrruueesstt mmoosstt aaddiiccttiivvee ppooiissoonn ooff aallll... Aa ppooiissoonn ooff nneeeedd aanndd mmoorrttaall tteerrrroorr... Bbyy ccuurriinngg tthheemm ooff tthhaatt wwaatteerr Ii hhaavvee ssttooppeedd

tthheeiirr ppaaiinn... Ssttooppeedd tthheeiirr ffeeaarr... Wwhheenn tthheeyy bbeeccoommee uusseedd ttoo tthhee tthhiirrsstt tthheeyy wwiillll rreeaalliizzee tthhiiss..."

"You're insane! I can't let you get away with this!"

"Tthheenn ccoommee aanndd ssttoopp mmee iiff yyoouu ccaann..."

Mega Man grit his teeth as he turned to examine all of the humans being kept captive while needing medical attention. He could try to transport them, but there were so many that he'd never get them all, even if the hostile robots outside weren't a factor. No, his best bet was to put a stop to Mummy Man as fast as possible before things got worse. Then the Sasoreenus and Deispiders would be released from his command and Mega Man could take control and have them transport all of the humans en masse to the nearest hospital at once.

Still, as he pressed onward, he couldn't ignore the pain that leaving those in need caused him.

"Wow... these Fear Masters are jerks..." a boy wearing a cardboard costume colored like a Gundam in the middle of the group stated.

"Yes, they were," Roll didn't even try to dispute that, "but they were also very strong and they didn't care to fight fair, even in the manner of constructing their lairs. For in addition to the hostages, Deispiders, Sasoreenus, and the Scarabaeus Saucer, Mummy Man's pyramid had some surprises embedded in the walls themselves..."

Mega Man's clock speed suddenly spiked when out of nowhere something grabbed his foot as he ran past. Turning and aiming his Mega Buster on reflex, he spotted a Zombie Joe arm embedded in the floor that had spontaneously reached up to grab him.

"Yaaaahhh!" the blue bomber screamed as he blasted the animated limb off of him. *'It's bad enough this place was constructed from*

robot remains, did some of them have to still be active *too?!'*

As if to answer that, a few spots on the wall lit up with haunting grins and Mega Man saw that the walls contained not only supposedly inactive Zombie Joe parts, but also fully active Jack-o-METs...

As he watched, a few managed to extract themselves from the wall, but most seemed only able to generate enough movement to uncover their projectile weapons and take a shot at him.

Dodging around the poorly-aimed energy weapons, Mega Man returned fire before running towards the end of the corridor and through the gate at the end. As it closed, he turned around...

And nearly ran face-first into the Scarab/UFO thing that had tried to scrap-bomb him outside.

The machine beeped angrily before rising up and shooting a magnetic tractor beam at Mega Man that lifted him up off the ground. It then made a sharp turn and sped towards the other end of the chamber, carrying Mega Man along with it and coming to a sharp halt right before it hit the wall, deactivating the tractor beam at the same time, using the momentum to fling Mega Man at the wall at dangerous speeds. Instead, the blue bomber flipped around to impact feet first and unleashing a charged shot at the robot's underside that blew out one of its hover mechanisms and caused it to crash.

"Iimmpprreessiivvee ttoorrmmeennttoorr..." the groaning voice from before spoke from somewhere as the door opposite the one Mega Man had entered opened up. "Ccoommee nnooww aanndd ffaaccee mmee..."

Mega Man stepped through, his face a mask of neutral determination and faced the master of the pyramid.

The form at the other end was roughly the size of Guts Man, but wrapped in bandages made of the same metallic silk the humans

below were imprisoned in. Glowing yellow eyes could be seen through the largest gap in the bandages and the gray metal beneath could be seen in a few areas, but was particularly clear in the one unbandaged hand the robot possessed, the other ending in a cannon barrel.

"I take it you're the Mummy Man," Mega Man stated.

"Yyeess..."

"And then Mega Man beats him up because he's so slow and moves like this, uuuunnnnggggghhhh...!" a kid dressed up in a cheap mummy costume that looked suspiciously like toilet paper laughed as he did an impression of a slow and clumsy mummy grab at a nearby girl who shrieked childishly and backed away.

"My brother wishes it was that easy," Roll corrected. "He may not have been as fast as Wolf Man or Witch Woman, but Mummy Man wasn't slow by any means. And he was also very strong, and his weapon had a very strange effect on robots. Can you guess what it was?"

"Is it what de-high-rated those people?" one young kid in a puffy pumpkin costume asked.

"That's stupid," another kid with a partial mask like skin peeled off of a cybernetic skell scoffed. "Robots don't need water anyway, so what good would it be against Mega Man?"

"More than you think. It had the effect of making ductile things brittle," Roll began, before trailing off at the blank looks on several faces. "Ductile things bend before they break, like most metals, while brittle things break before they bend, like ice. His Desert Laser could turn my brother's metal armor fairly brittle when it hit, making it so his physical blows cracked the armor and hurt my brother that much more..." (20)

Mega Man tried to focus as his damage sensors blared over numerous cracks in his armor that had resulted from the body-blow Mummy Man had dealt him. *'Shows me for getting careless and thinking his weapon wouldn't hurt me that much.'* Honestly, whoever thought that robots didn't feel pain probably never considered logical things like having to override system shutdown due to damage reports in order to evade a follow-up blow.

"Iitt iiss uusseelleessss..." Mummy Man groaned as he fired his dehydrating weapon again, causing cracks to appear in the wall behind where Mega Man was as the blue robot forced himself to jump out of the way despite his protesting systems.

'I wish I could just use an E-Tank,' the blue bomber thought to himself as he involuntarily glanced over at the pile of black dust that had resulted from Mummy Man interrupting his previous attempt to down one of the restorative items. *'Or that I could fire my buster without creating more stress fractures in my system or waiting for his weapon to wear off... Think Rock, think! Wolf Claws... I'm hurting myself enough as it is. Matter Phase... delaying tactic and I'm low on it anyway. Hypnotic Gaze... if it doesn't work I'm a sitting duck. Cold Spell...'*

"Yyoouu aarree ddoonnee ffoorr ttoorrmmeennttoorr ooff tthhee aazzuurree hhuuee..." Mummy Man intoned as he took aim.

'Worth a shot,' Mega Man concluded as he switched to Witch Woman's weapon and fired it from his hand at the same time as Mummy Man's laser. The two weapons met in mid-air and to Mega Man's astonishment, the Cold Spell weapon got bigger as it continued its path to hit Mummy Man, freezing him in place.

"Why would it do that?" a kid in a white spandex outfit like the one worn by the pilots from that Evangelion series asked.

"Don't you know?" another in a similar costume, only red,next to the first replied before Roll could. "Dry ice is colder than normal ice." (21)

Roll stifled a giggle and decided not to elaborate on the technical aspects of the interaction between the two weapons. "Something like that. Anyway, my brother took the opportunity to down the second E-Tank he'd been carrying for emergencies, giving precious energy and materials to his self-repair systems so they could patch him up before he continued the fight..."

"Yyoouu ccaann nnoott eessccaappee mmyy ccuurrssee ssoo eeaass–"Mummy Man moaned as he jumped forward and tried to grab Mega Man, only for the blue bomber to dodge, push off from Mummy Man's side with his hands, and hit him with another Cold Spell.

'Fewer systems protests this time,' Mega Man noted with satisfaction. *'The effects of his weapon are wearing off.'*

"–iillyy ttoorrmmeennttoorr..." Mummy Man finished his previous proclamation as he turned and took aim at the blue bomber, but the robot hero was ready this time.

Right when the barrel of Mummy Man's laser came into view, Mega Man fired the Cold Spell right at the barrel. The orb of freezing energy entered the weapon right as Mummy Man tried to fire his laser and froze the large robot solid. Mega Man took the opportunity to charge up his Mega Buster and fire it, just in case that hadn't been enough.

With cracks visible in his armor beneath the bandages, Mummy Man fell to the floor and did not rise. After several long moments to verify that he was down for good, Mega Man began to make remote contact with the Deispiders and Sasoreenus that were even then beginning to wander about in confusion. With their commanding unit disabled, the robots readily accepted his commands to find the dehydrated humans and, as quickly and gently as possible, transport them to the nearest hospital for treatment.

"Were they all okay?" a younger girl in a nurse costume asked with concern.

"Yes," Roll agreed readily. "It took some time for them to fully recover, but they were all fine in the end."

"So who was next?" a kid in a sentai hero costume asked, clearly eager to hear more.

"Well, while the other robots were transporting the humans to safety, my brother decided to climb to the top of the pyramid and get a look at the surrounding area since it was generally clear of the fog that enshrouded the rest of the city."

"Where was the fog coming from anyway?"

"Funny you should ask that," Roll took the question in stride. "Because the first thing he noted was that with Mummy Man down, the fog was beginning to roll into the area. This was actually fortunate because he could then use the movement to track the fog's origin, and what do you think he found?"

"The creature from the black lagoon?" a kid in a costumed apparently themed along the lines of his suggestion guessed.

Roll snickered for a few moments at the guess before getting control of herself. "Close, very close. Do you all know Lagoon Park?"

There was a round of nods from several in the room. Lagoon Park was a public area set around a natural lagoon right off the coast. The shallow water was a popular swimming and leisure boating area due to the shoals that kept the ocean waves from disturbing the general calm.

"Well," Roll continued as the music Tango was playing shifted to an eerie theme that seemed to suit the idea of fog perfectly, hinting at any number of unknown terrors that could be lurking far closer than anyone suspected, (22) "as fate would have it, Lagoon Park was the

direction that all the fog in the city was coming from. And when my brother arrived there, he found that the waters had been turned black with muck and grime..."

Mega Man knelt by the edge of the lagoon and stared at the... there was no other word for it... the dark black *sludge* that had apparently replaced the lagoon water. Seeing the water's edge through the fog hadn't been clear, but up close it was quite evident that something was *very* wrong around here...

Dipping an experimental finger in the tainted water, the blue bomber brought the viscously coated finger up for a substance analysi–

"YAAAAHHH!" was the only warning he received before a sharp blow to the back of his helmet knocked him forward into the muck.

'That's much more of a sample than I really wanted,' Mega Man groused as he made to stand up, more surprised than injured by the blow.

"The beast lives!" the voice yelled as the robot wiped the sludge from his face to clear his optics and saw a muck-covered human brandishing an equally filthy baseball bat in his direction.

"Hey now, *blegh* I'm here to hel–" Mega Man held up his hands in a peaceful gesture, only for the human to freak and start running like the hounds of hell were on his heels.

"DON'T EAT ME! AAAAHHHH!"

'What in the...?' Mega Man blinked owlishly as he watched the man run back into the fog, only to be distracted by the sound of something swimming towards him. Turning to look, he caught a blurry glimpse of a metal fin in the black water right before some type of robot piranha jumped out, teeth aimed right at his face. "Gah!" the blue bomber reacted with a backhand that sent the robo-fish flailing off to the side with a murky splash before deciding that further

analysis of the situation could take place out of the robo-piranha infested waters.

A slower scramble than he was comfortable with later, and Mega Man was back on the shore, just in time for his substance analyzers to give a report.

'Wow...' he thought as he looked at the chemical list, *'there's enough hallucinogens in this stuff that a teddy bear could be mistaken for a ravenous monster...'*

"No, not Teddy!" a young girl in the audience dressed like Goldilocks hugged her bear protectively. "He'd never hurt anyone!"

"I know," Roll smiled at the girl, "but anyone who was poisoned by the black lagoon waters that day wouldn't be able to tell. And there were far more dangerous things lurking in the fog than poisoned water and hungry robo-fish. For one thing, that trip into the water had clogged my brother's Mega Buster something fierce..."

Mega Man swore silently as his attempt to shoot the dragonfly-like Yambow only resulted in a spurt of muck emerging with a sickening *splorp*. Lacking in offensive abilities at the moment to defend against a hostile robot, Mega Man elected to run and hope that the gunk drained from his systems fairly quickly.

'I'd ask how this can possibly get any worse, but I just know *something would answer me...'* the blue bomber thought as he did his best to put distance between himself and the pursuing Yanbow while having his vision obscured by the fog.

"fOod... eAt..." a garbled voice rang out in the fog just before Mega Man saw a red object emerge from in front of him at high speed and dove to the side. The red object, apparently connected to something still in the fog, continued to extend rapidly until it hit the Yanbow,

where it stuck and retracted just as rapidly back into the thick mist where metallic crunching sounds could be heard.

'I was right...' Mega Man prepared himself and dove to the side again as the red object flew right past where he'd been standing before retracting again. Then he felt the slight tremor of something large pushing off of the ground and heard the rustle of something large crashing through the unseen tree branches overhead and slid out of the way right before a large green form slammed into the ground where he'd been standing. *'That's...'* Mega Man thought as he took in the sideways profile of the robot that had tried to squish him, the larger hind legs configured solely for jumping, the big eyes that bulged from the head, the enormous mouth even when just compared to the rest of the body, (23) *'a really big Kerog...'*

The giant frog robot turned clumsily, but swiftly, in Mega Man's direction before opening its mouth and letting out a fireball the size of the blue bomber. Mega Man jumped over the flames and tried to return fire, but all that came out was another spurt of sludge.

'Oh, come on!'

The Mega Kerog gave a croaking laugh before trying to jump at Mega Man, who slid under the frog, forcing the amphibian-themed robot to jump again to turn around.

'Okay, think, what can I do about this?' Mega Man's processor's raced as he backed up, and nearly tripped as he almost backed into the water. *'...There's an idea...'*

Waiting for an opening, Mega Man prepared himself to jump and launched up and forwards when the Mega Kerog's red tongue lashed out at him again and spurted as much of the muck still in his systems as he could straight at the frog robot's eyes. The viscous liquid splattered on the bulging optics, covering them entirely and the robot began to thrash about, searching for its target.

"Over here!" Mega Man shouted after retreating to the water's edge. The Mega Kerog turned in his direction and, just as Mega Man had hoped, jumped high and long to come splashing down into the murk where it proceeded to become stuck. "Well, that worked about as well as I could ho–"

The sound of tearing metal cut off the blue bomber's relief as several piranha robots began ripping into the Mega Kerog's armor to his complete shock.

"But... he's one of yours... right...?" the blue bomber tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

"fAilUrE fOod..." the garbled voice from before rang out as part of the murk bulged upwards and slid down the figure that emerged. It was roughly humanoid with long webbed fingers that ended in wicked talons, fish-like fins at the elbows and knees as well as one larger fin jutting up in the center of its bulbous head. The eyes were large, round, and as pitch black as the murk that sloughed off the figure's form, the face lacked any kind of nose, and the wide mouth held many long, pointed teeth. Instead of metal armor underneath, the figure appeared to have rubbery skin that glistened with moisture.

"Who are you?" Mega Man backed away cautiously. "What do you want?"

"gILl mAn..." the figure gurgled out as it advanced out of the water. "wAnT... bLue FooD...!"

"You mean it... wanted to *eat* Mega Man?" a boy who'd apparently just borrowed one of his dad's Hawaiian shirts for a costume gaped.

"Yes, yes it did..."

The Mega Buster flashed briefly before expelling a few lingering bits of grime and some smoke rather than a bolt of plasma.

"giLl maN... eAt wEll...!" the amphibious Fear Master lunged forward, talons outstretched and mouth wide, forcing Mega Man to dive to the side if he didn't want his armor ripped apart.

"Only if you like hot plasma!" Mega Man retorted as he began firing his Mega Buster at the opponent who'd just overshot his position. The first couple of tries got more smoke, but the repeated firing finally bore fruit as Gill Man began to turn around.

"nOt waNt...!" Gill Man retorted as dark viscous liquid seeped out of the 'skin' on his arm into a thick orb that he flung at the plasma bolt. The heated plasma fizzled as it struck the sludge, which continued on to strike Mega Man's buster, clogging it up once again.

"Oh, this isn't good..." Mega Man frantically tried to force the sludge out of his weapon as Gill Man readied himself for another lunge. "Definitely not good!"

Instead of trying to meet the robot master in an exchange of blows, Mega Man slid under the lunge and began running away from the water's edge, hoping to at least draw his opponent away from favorable terrain.

"So he went to hide in the fog?" a kid dressed like Bubble Man asked in confusion.

"I bet he was going to set up an ambush!" another who'd decided to go as Top Man despite being on crutches chimed.

"He tried at least," Roll allowed, "but Gill Man's senses were far less hindered by the fog than my brother's were..."

'Okay, this wasn't my brightest idea...' Mega Man thought to himself as he scanned the fog. Somehow Gill Man had no trouble at all tracking him through the thick cover and was able to hang back out

of the blue bomber's reduced sensory range before moving in to strike.

"gIll mAn seE liGHts..." the garbled voice of his opponent was apparently distracted by something, prompting Mega Man to turn until he also saw lights in the fog. "lIghTs... tAstY...?"

"No!" Mega Man yelled out as he charged in the direction of the lights, terrified that Gill Man might be about to attack a group of humans. (24) He barely had time to register the real identity of the lights' owners before they opened fire on him. *'Blasted Jack-o-METs! As if I didn't have enough trouble!'* the blue bomber did his best to return fire, his Mega Buster emitting puffs of acrid smoke as it tried to expel the gunk clogging it up and preventing the weapon from firing.

The screech of metal on metal pierced the air and made Mega Man cover his audio receptors.

"blEaH..." the voice of Gill Man declared from the same direction of the Jack-o-METs, "tASte baD...!"

Deciding to focus on the larger threat, Mega Man targeted the location of Gill Man's voice and began firing until his arm cannon finally got a shot off.

"bLUe fOod bEtTeR..." Gill Man apparently decided before another blob of the dark viscous substance flew out of the fog in Mega Man's direction.

Sidestepping the projectile, Mega Man prepared for the lunging attack he was sure would follow and was not disappointed. Grabbing the inside of Gill Man's wrists, Mega Man rolled onto his back with the lunge and planted his feet in his opponent's sternum and pushed off, sending Gill Man tumbling back into the fog.

"blUE foOd aNnoY gIlL maN..." the gurgling hiss threatened from the cover of the fog.

"I'm about to do a lot more than that..." Mega Man retorted under his breath as he analyzed the scan his copy chip had gotten from the contact. According to the schematics he'd gotten, Gill Man's systems needed water to operate. *Lots* of water. He was practically saturated with the same sludge that infested the lagoon. Which made the choice of weapon to counter him painfully obvious.

Switching to the Desert Laser, Mega Man pointed in the general direction of where Gill Man had spoken and fired. The fog seemed to retreat from the ray of energy and Mega Man suddenly had a clear view of the area in front of him, including a somewhat startled Gill Man.

"wHAt BLue FoOd dO...?!" the cannibalistic robot demanded as he began to form another mass of what Mega Man now knew to be his Black Sludge weapon to throw.

The Desert Laser met the Black Sludge in mid-air and turned it to dust as it punched through to hit Gill Man, causing an entire area of his body to dry and shrivel before the moisture from the surrounding areas seeped back in, leaving the Fear Master looking somewhat reduced overall.

"tHat... thAt... hURt...!" Gill Man spat in confusion as Mega Man took aim and fired again. By the time he stopped, the formerly terrifying Gill Man was little more than a shriveled inert husk of no threat to anyone and the fog that he'd sent forth to engulf the city began to lift.

"So he could call in help now?" one of the children, a discarded mask of Mayor Leonardo Dorado nearby, asked.

"Actually, no," Roll shook her head. "The fog was not the source of the signal jamming that kept my brother isolated."

"Aw, Mega Man don't need any help!" another kid dressed like some pro wrestler boasted. "After that, I bet the bogeyman would think twice before messing with him!"

"Yeah, the bogeyman checks his closet for Mega Man!"

"Oh, you think that do you?" Roll smirked as the music Tango was playing changed to a fast paced disco tune, one that suggested fevered movement. (25) "Because my brother was about to receive a challenge from none other than that very person. His next opponent was to be Boogie Man, the dancing demon..."

As Mega Man walked back into the city proper after once more failing to contact any of his allies, he began to hear a rhythmic beat. A tune that would not be out of place in a discotheque and which was now blaring from speakers that lined the streets.

And in the distance, he could see someone approaching through the lifting fog. It looked like a human woman, but she was... dancing? Energetically at that as she pretty much boogied right on up to Mega Man.

Up close, the blue bomber could see things about the woman that worried him. For one, she was sweating more heavily than her activity should be responsible for, and for another her eyes dilated randomly, like she was having trouble focusing on him.

"Miss...? Is something wrong?" he asked. "You don't look good..."

"Oh, I'm just groovy..." she giggled in the giddy manner of someone who wasn't fully cognizant of what was going on. "I got the fever, ya know? Gotta dance the fever out..."

"I think you've danced enough, miss..." Mega Man moved to restrain the woman as gently as he could, only for her to dance out of his grip with surprising speed.

"No such thing, man..." she giggled deliriously. "Got the skinny for you from the funkmaster... The Boogie Man... The bad dude's callin' you out... Dance to the death and all that jazz... Even sent some hip dance partners to see if you had enough groove..."

Mega Man saw the glint of steel out of the corner of his eye and dove to tackle the woman out of the way as the curved blades carved gashes into the street.

"Gonna need slicker moves than that to handle the Groove Reapers, man..." the woman giggled in his grip as the blades boomeranged back to a pair of figures in black rhinestone-studded cloaks and attached to their arms.

"Stay here," Mega Man told the woman as he turned to face the new adversaries.

"No way..." he heard the woman refuse and get up behind him, "'S not hip to listen to the man..."

'Great,' he swore as he began to put distance between himself and the woman, hoping the cloaked robots would focus on him and not put the woman in danger. Fortunately it worked as the Groove Reapers ignored the woman and began to move towards him in a spinning maneuver. He waited until their blades were thrown and slid under the projectiles, coming up between them and his opponents, Mega Buster blazing.

"So, the Boogie Man could hypnotize others like Dracu Man?" a kid wearing the mismatched pieces of several different costumes (he seemed to be a sentai ninja priest cowboy superhero fox fairy devil policeman grouch from space or something) asked with a thoughtful look.

"Not like Dracu Man," Roll refuted. "What the Boogie Man used caused delirium, or heavy confusion. While some of the effects were similar in that both groups were much more suggestible than normal, the methods were very different."

"How?"

"Well, you'll just have to listen to what happened when my brother tracked him down past a small army of Groove Reapers, Jack-o-METs, and Tellys. As it turned out, he'd holed up in an office building with a large atrium that had been converted into a discotheque for a massive Halloween party..."

Mega Man dodged around a blast from a Jack-o-MET and blasted another of those oddly tye-dyed Tellys, the cylindrical security drones that would pursue any target they found relentlessly. Not terribly dangerous, but they could be hazardous to maneuver around and liked to ram him it they managed to get close enough.

Returning fire to the Jack-o-MET, Mega Man eliminated the last obstacle between himself and the doors leading to the source of the musical broadcast he'd been following. Stepping through, he was greeted with the same music that had led him here, but now with a singer as well.

"You got the fe-ver, that ain't no lie! And not that you got it, you gonna dance 'til you DIE! Oh!"

Across the atrium, Mega Man could see numerous costumed humans dancing as deliriously as the woman that had been sent with the message, with little or no regard to what managed to get in their way. A few Tellys and a couple of Groove Reapers spun in time to the music, thankfully from vantage points out of the way of the gyrating humans. Above the crowd was a giant mirrored disco ball with what looked like four spotlights attached to the bottom, reflecting multi-colored light all over the room in a way that made it hard to focus. And on the far side of all of this, holding a microphone, was a lanky red-skinned robot with white armor done up like a stereotypical disco suit, a gold chain holding a medallion with an inverted pentagram over his exposed chest, with a sharp angular face, long ears that almost seemed like horns from a distance and a toothy grin so wide it couldn't possibly be natural. (26)

"Well, look what the jive turkey dragged in, cats!" the robot halted his singing as spotlights converged on the blue bomber. "What it is?!"

"Stop what you're doing and release these people!" Mega Man demanded in a loud voice, only for the fevered humans to immediately boo him harshly.

"Oooo," the demonic robot retorted in mock fright, "the man be talkin' jive! What do we say to that, boogie cats?"

"LATER HATER!" was the unified response.

"Well, that seems unanimous, man," the robot shrugged with false sympathy. "Better do what's good for you and just hit the road. You don't want nonna this, dig?"

"Funny," Mega Man walked forward calmly, the dancers moving away from him with sneers as they kept up their gyrations, "you're the one who challenged me."

"And the Boogie Man is not impressed!" the self-identified robot scoffed and gestured to some large screens around the room that were currently displaying Mega Man himself. "Why, we've been hip to your happenings all night long, and, man, you just do not make the cut."

"Neither does the subharmonic frequency you're transmitting to cause disorientation and delirium in humans across the city," Mega Man leveled an accusing glare at the Boogie Man as he stopped right below the giant disco ball.

"Would I do a thing like that, boogie cats? Heck, would you care if I was?" the robot asked confidently to a resounding "WHATEVER!" from the crowd. "See? I'm completely on the up and up here, man! I'm cool and the only way you could get any squarer is with a trash compactor!"

Scattered laughter rang out across the atrium at that.

"But, I'm the Boogie Man, not the Bogus Man, so I'll slide you a shot. You take my DJ on and I'll give you the dance-off of your life, dig? I'll even clear the boogie floor for you!"

"Yeah, sure" Mega Man agreed.

"Right on!" the Boogie Man yelled. "Everybody give the man some room for the reaming he's about to re-ceive!" In short order the center of the atrium was cleared as the delirious partygoers danced off to the side and congregated in a waving mass that hurled laughter and insults his way. "DJ Pookin! Time to rock on brotha!"

Mega Man heard the sound of engines flaring to life above him and realized that those hadn't been spotlights on the giant disco ball just in time to slide out of the way as the giant mirror-polished version of the heavily armored pumpkin-themed sentry VAN Pookin slammed down right where he'd been standing.

"Wait, the mirror ball was an enemy robot in disguise?" one of the kids, a classic pirate, blinked in confusion. "How did that work?"

"Very well, actually," Roll smirked as a few kids laughed at the zinger. "It's true that the disguise might not have held up if my brother had paid more attention to it, but it looked so much in place that it just didn't occur to him until right then..."

Mega Man primed his servos and stared into the 'eyes' of DJ Pookin as he waited. Aside from the mirrored finish, the thing looked exactly like VAN Pookin. And since he wasn't about to bet on the mirrored armor not being able to reflect weapons fire, that meant waiting for his opponent to open up and try to fire on him.

DJ Pookin's jets flared to life as it rose up into the air and Mega Man began charging his buster in response. The front jets cut out, allowing DJ Pookin to shoot forward trying to ram Mega Man, only for the blue bomber to slide under his adversary instead.

The mirrored pumpkin-shaped robot turned around and the top half of its armor detached from the lower along a jagged seam to reveal a smaller purple pumpkin-shaped armor within, which also detached its top half to reveal a more animate orange core that proceeded to shoot green fireballs at the blue robot opposing it. Mega Man dashed forward around the projectiles and unleashed a charged shot point-blank at DJ Pookin's core, following it with several smaller shots as insurance that blew the vulnerable core to smithereens. The armored halves collapsed back down and the outer 'eyes' began flashing as DJ Pookin's jets flared erratically, lifting it into the air like a drunken hovercraft and trying to fly over Mega Man, who simply hopped back as the jets gave out and the large sentinel came crashing to the ground.

Around the atrium, the delirious humans stopped dancing, many collapsing on the spot as the toll of continuous physical activity finally caught up with them while the rest shook their heads and looked around in confusion.

"Groove Reapers," Boogie Man's voice echoed loud and clear across the suddenly silent room, "if any of these jive turkeys try to run, carve them up."

The robed bots in question brandished their blades with audible *shings* and turned menacingly to the now terrified crowd.

"So..." Mega Man glared at the grinning demon robot, "your sentinel was the source of the sound, not you."

"Correct, man," the Fear Master calmly dropped the microphone he'd been holding. "Unlike many of my fellow Fear Masters, I can't directly torment humans with my abilities. After all," he continued, bringing a hand up towards his face and curling the long, thin fingers with their sharpened fingernails into a clawed pose, upon which the hand burst into multi-colored flames that illuminated his grinning face from below in an eerie manner, "I'd burn them to a crisp long before I had any fun if I tried."

"Ah, the semi-obligatory fire user," Mega Man nodded as his hand began to emit the icy blue sparks of the Cold Spell weapon. "Why don't you chill?"

Mega Man threw the frosty orb at Boogie Man, who casually swiped it out of the air with his flames. "Chill?" he laughed. "Quit talking static, man! We're gonna have a *hot* time tonight!" he yelled as he jumped forwards in a clear attempt to slam his burning hand into the blue bomber. "DISCO INFERNO!"

Mega Man jumped back, but when Boogie Man impacted the floor, a wave of multi-colored flames erupted in every direction.

"His weapon was called *what* ?" a kid in a sparkly starry robe with matching hat interrupted with a sputtered laugh. He wasn't the only one amused either. (27)

"The Disco Inferno," Roll repeated. "Laugh all you want, but those flames were no joke..."

Mega Man braced himself against the wave of flame, but was still almost caught off-guard as Boogie Man charged in behind it with both hands aflame and swiped at him.

Mega Man managed to deflect the lead hand across the path of Boogie Man's other arm, only for the demonic dancer to twist into a spin and bring a flaming foot around at Mega Man's head, knocking him back.

"Bouge move, man!" the Fear Master moved to press the attack, jumping over Mega Man's leg sweep in a front flip and swiping his hand across the blue bomber's back while inverted. He then landed on his feet and sprung back towards his opponent in a handstand spinning kick that Mega Man jumped over. "You need to get real before you get bent!" he kept up the chatter as he sprung to his feet,

spinning around and flinging multicolored fireballs at his airborne opponent.

"Gah!" Mega Man grunted in pain as one of the fireballs struck him in the chest and immediately sprung back upon landing to avoid a flaming axe kick. The Boogie Man used the kicking foot to propel himself forward in a lunge, only for Mega Man to spin around the strike in a move that would have done his old enemy Top Man proud (28) and land a roundhouse to Boogie Man's back.

"So, the man *can* boogie," the Fear Master's grin somehow widened as he jumped up in a somersaulting drop kick. "Time to step it up then and drop it like it's hot! BURN BABY BURN!"

This time when the wave of flame propagated from the impact point, Mega Man jumped over it and switched to the Black Sludge weapon of Gill Man and shot a thick blob at Boogie Man during the moment he was immobile after the power strike. The blob of sludge engulfed the foot that had impacted, smothering the multicolored flames around it.

"Aw, grody, man!" Boogie Man's impossible grin dropped to a look of disgust as he threw more psychadelic fireballs at his opponent. "Foul!"

"Nice to know you don't like it," Mega Man noted as he sidestepped the flames and shot another blob, this time hitting one of Boogie Man's hands.

"Okay, that's just jive, man!" the Fear Master spat before beginning to spin on the sludged foot with the one still aflame out, arcs of flame shooting out in a spiral centered on Boogie Man. "Time to get burned!"

Mega Man slid under the arcs of flame, shooting more blobs of Black Sludge at Boogie Man before he collided with the one leg supporting the Fear Master's weight, sending him to the floor in a spinning crash.

"Bogus, man..." Boogie Man groaned from his prone position. "Totally bogus..."

Mega Man walked to his downed opponent, wary for further retaliation, but the Boogie Man didn't rise, even when Mega Man knelt down and placed a hand to the Fear Master's chest, copying his weapon.

"You've lost," Mega Man stated, "now let these people go."

"Heh... Why not?" Boogie Man chuckled from his prone position and the Groove Reapers not only stood down, they shut off. The costumed partygoers, even the ones who were exhausted from their previous exertions, needed no further encouragement to start evacuating the building. "It's not like you can win anyway, man..." the Fear Master continued. "There's still *that guy* ... the last of us... the one even I don't mess with... He's waiting for you at the top of this very building... Keeping you from calling for help... And he might be weak to flame, but... heh... hehehehehe... He's so buff he'll still kill you anyway... And even if you get past *him* ... hehehe..."

"Come with me," Mega Man offered. "You have so much potential to do good."

"HA!" Boogie Man began laughing uproariously. "Saying that with me lyin' here...! The winner givin' a crap about the loser...! Dream on... I'm a demon, man... and demons do the burning... we don't get burned... You're only worth something if you win... So if you lose..." Boogie Man's grin widened once more, "what's the point of living?"

Mega Man's eyes widened and he jumped back just in time to avoid the brunt of Boogie Man self-destructing.

"Wow... so who was it? The last guy I mean?" a kid in the front wearing a brown hooded robe and carrying a blue toy beam saber asked excitedly.

"Can't you guess?" Roll teased. "The other Fear Masters were all representations of not only famous monsters, but also of the various kinds of things people are afraid of. Even the Zombie Joes represented the fear of death and the possibility of the dead rising from the grave. Ghost Woman, while seemingly representing dead spirits, would be more accurately equated to all the mysterious phenomena that people still can't explain, even with all our scientific knowledge. Wolf Man represents the animal instincts that humans still possess and often try to suppress. Dracu Man is an ancient fear, from a time when a small class of humans were able to do anything to anyone, no matter how despicable, because no one could stop them. It's no coincidence that Dracula is referred to by the noble title of Count. Mummy Man tied to the human desire for immortality and the fearful lengths some will go to achieve such a thing. Gill Man harkens to the mysterious deep seas, the last unexplored frontier on our own planet which may yet hold any number of unknowns. Boogie Man manifested as an embodiment of pure evil, lacking in any positive or sympathetic traits. A terrifying thing to anyone. Even Witch Woman represents the way humans fear other humans who are different from them. That is what Halloween is, a time for us all to recognize that which we fear and celebrate it as a part of ourselves instead of hiding from it."

"But what about the last Fear Master?" the kid demanded, getting supporting calls from around the room.

Roll laughed again. Of course they didn't want a life lesson. They wanted a story with scary monsters and a brave hero. "The last one represented a much more recent fear. One that was so new when the definitive monster was first written, that it made him a class of terror unto himself. The fear of what man might unleash in his neverending quest for knowledge. My brother was about to face the monster who represented the fears of human progress, the very thing that I, my brother, and all robots owe our very existence to. The monster stitched together from mismatched parts and brought to life by a bolt of lightning." (29)

Almost every gaze stared in rapt attention as Tango began to play a new tune, one that sounded like a determined march towards an inevitable fate. (30)

"He was about to face the Franken Man..."

Mega Man stared at what he'd found on the top of the building. The transmission tower was expected as it was a planned part of the building and likely what the last Fear Master was using to jam communications. The mismatched unfinished castle made from stone, scrap metal, I-beams, concrete, glass, and a few other random materials on the other hand...

Krack-BOOM

Oh, and there was the thunderstorm that had sprung up, centered on this building. Lightning kept striking the transmission tower at irregular intervals as he looked on.

As for defenses, there were no obvious external defenses save for a few jack-o-lanterns and a half-dozen suits of green and orange armor proportioned for highly muscular individuals that flanked the large double doors (one oak, the other pine).

"Okay, look," Mega Man sighed as he stood back from the seemingly innocuous sentries, "you guy's aren't fooling anyone, so why don't we skip the usual song and dance where you try to ambush me and just get this over with."

There was a pause, one just long enough for the blue bomber to wonder if he'd misread the situation, before the helmets of the armored suits popped off; sprouted arms, legs, and opened their eyes; revealing themselves as Raggers. As the Raggers grabbed the bladed crest on their helmets and threw them forwards, the Jack-o-METs also opened fire as well.

"Glad to know you're accommodating of guests!" Mega Man replied as he ducked and wove through the barrage and returned fire.

"Pfft!" a boy towards the front in a black hooded robe with a red toy beam saber scoffed. "Easy pickings!"

"Yeah!" a girl dressed like Roll's alter ego Mega Woman agreed.

"True, but there were more surprises inside. Such as Shield Attackers that were disguised as parts of the wall, and a few stone gargoyles that sprang to life when my brother approached..."

Mega Man sprang back from the stone claws of the two gargoyles that had attacked him partway through the castle. The Raggers and Jack-o-METs were no surprise; and while the Shield Attackers that sprang out of the wall were somewhat clever, they were still vulnerable from behind and not all that fast with turning around; but the two robot gargoyles made of stone flanking an inner door had been a surprise and nearly tagged him.

Speaking of which, they pressed the attack by charging him in unison. *'Clever design, but not too bright,'* the blue bomber thought as he jumped over the dual charge and blasted them in the back. Their stone armor did prove fairly tough as they remained functional enough to turn and charge him again. *'Tough though.'*

Mega Man jumped over them again, allowing the stone robots to plow into the very door they'd been guarding, breaking it down and damaging them further. A few more shots from his Mega Buster and the gargoyle robots stayed down this time.

Walking into the next room, Mega Man saw only an empty chamber with a sealed gate across from him and blinked as he looked around the room. *'Now why were they guarding that door if the room is–oh...'* the blue bomber's thoughts halted as he looked upwards right before a large object attached to the ceiling dropped down into the center of

the chamber with an impact that shook the building hard enough to knock Mega Man off his feet.

The thing was a round boulder of thick metal armor that had clearly been welded together from several different pieces. It had four rigid mismatched protrusions extending from it in a parody of arms and legs as well as a familiar type of tiny disc-shaped head. And the whole thing was given a demented clown theme, complete with red eyes and sinister expression. It may have been bigger than the last version he'd faced, but he'd recognize the general design anywhere.

'Well, of all the things I was expecting to face, I wouldn't have guessed Mash.'

"It's a Monster Mash!" a younger kid dressed like a stage magician (complete with top hat that was a bit too big for him) proclaimed with a wide grin. (31)

Roll stifled a giggle as a chorus of groans and laughter went up at the terrible pun. Honestly, if no one else had made that joke she *would* have. "Yes it was," she agreed with a smile, "but while it may have been bigger and meaner than the original, its fighting style was no different..."

Mega Man began charging his buster and easily slide out of the way as the Monster-sized Mash jumped and slammed into his former position, bracing himself in a three-point stance against the impact tremor before jumping and firing his charged shot at the robot's head. The blast knocked the disc-shaped head clean off where it began bouncing off of the walls at dangerous speeds.

Mega Man watched the angles of deflection and switched to the Wolf Claw as the head caromed directly at him. He slashed at it as it passed him, carving deep gashes in the thin armor that began sparking vigorously. The robot's body twitched its arms as if to catch the flying head, only to halt as the critically damaged control unit

sputtered and died, leaving the main body little more than a giant mass of immobile armor that slowly toppled over. The damaged head bounced off the walls once more to ping feebly on the floor a few times before rolling to a stop.

"Well, that was fairly easy..." Mega Man blinked, wary of some sort of hidden surprise as the closed gate rose up to allow him access to the next room. He only hesitated for a moment before walking through into the room beyond.

The gate slid closed to no surprise from the blue bomber, for not only had he expected such, he was too busy taking in the figure at the other end of the chamber he found himself in.

The chamber itself was filled with computer equipment that positively hummed with electricity. Some of it made sense, but other things seemed to exist more for show than purpose. Wires everywhere that crackled and sparked with every influx of voltage that Mega Man could only presume came from the lightning strikes outside, and racks of medical blades that would have been useless working with the average robot. Some of them seemed stained with what Mega Man hoped was rust. And at the opposite end of the room was a robot strapped to an upright operating table with thick steel bands and connected to several thick wires that fed electrical power directly into his systems.

The robot was massive for a humanoid design. At least a head taller than the likes of Guts Man or Stone Man, and with a solid build that clearly indicated great physical strength. His armor was covered with padded material; designed in the manner of a long-sleeved shirt, sleeveless vest, long pants, and thick boots; clearly designed for shock absorption and the synthetic skin underneath was a deep shade of green. The robot's head was large with a thick, square jaw and a flat top that had what looked like laser turrets at the front, each side, and presumably at the back, as well as appearing to be designed to rotate, allowing the barrels to be switched readily. His eyes were currently closed and his 'ears' were thick bolts that two of

the electrical wires attached to with alligator clips, like jumper cables, with the other wires connected to his arms and torso.

"So," Mega Man ventured as he took in the immobilized for, "I guess you're Franken Man?"

"Indeed I am," the robot's voice rumbled as he opened his eyes to reveal a pair of pure yellow optics. "And you are DLN-001, one half of Project: Rock and Roll, are you not?"

"Wait, he could *speak* ?" a boy dressed like the classic monster himself blinked in confusion.

"Of course he could," Roll blinked right back, "why wouldn't he?"

"Well, the one in the old movies never did..."

"Unfortunately, this wasn't one of those old movies," Roll smiled kindly. "Franken Man was actually quite eloquent in fact..."

"Um... right..." Mega Man blinked. He hadn't been referred to like that in... well, a long time... "You know, we don't have to fight each other," he offered, getting back on track. "If you just–"

"Yes, we do," Franken Man interrupted. "We are robots. We do as we are told."

"I..." Mega Man stalled at the calm declaration. "No... We're meant to help people and improve their lives! We're made to build, not to destroy!"

"Are we?" Franken Man stared back stoically. "You, a lab assistant re-made into a war machine, dare to claim that robots are not meant to destroy? That we can choose our paths for ourselves?"

"Yes! You can choose not to hurt others!"

"Can I? Any more than you can choose not to fight against me? I was made to fight and destroy, to block you off from any outside aid. You were made to aid humans who could not do their own work, and then re-made to fight for a humanity that could not fight for itself. You think that the humans who created us intended peace? Are you blind? What has happened tonight is not peace."

"Because your fellow Fear Masters set out to hurt people!"

"Of course. It is what we were designed to do. To harm, and torment, and destroy. Humanity asked for these things and so we were made to fulfill that purpose."

"That... causing pain is no purpose! No one would ask for what I saw tonight!"

"Hmph... You know so little of the way things are. What do you think humanity is? A communion of loving spirits working to discover a higher truth? No! Humanity is nothing more than a miserable little pile of secrets, hatred, and lies. A duplicitous cesspit that would sooner devour itself than admit how flawed it is. We have no choice. Our battle was fated when our programs were written," Franken Man's arms flexed and the steel restraints snapped like tissue paper. "But I see it is useless to talk to one as naive as you... You shall fight for them, and you shall die for them as well!" (32)

Mega Man barely ducked the electrical discharge that shot from the forward turret on Franken Man's head, and blew through the wall behind him as if it were made of straw and sticks instead of stone and steel.

"What? His... his weapon did *what* ?" a boy and girl in the audience both dressed in matching martial arts pants and chinese shirts blinked wide eyes.

"Blew a hole in a wall of steel and stone like it was made of paper mache," Roll repeated. "After all, Franken Man was the strongest

and most powerful of the Fear Masters..."

'I can't let that hit me,' Mega Man noted to himself as he dashed forward and blasted Franken Man from close range, only for the larger robot to ignore the hits and grab the open barrel of his arm cannon with one hand, sending electrical charges surging through the blue bomber's body simply from contact.

The shock from the maneuver and the hesitation to fire again lest his Mega Buster backfire from the obstruction was all Franken Man needed to tighten his grip, sending stress warnings flaring in Mega Man's systems from the pressure, and twist his body, whipping the blue bomber around by his arm and flinging him bodily across the floor.

Mega Man didn't even have time to assess his strained servos before the turrets in Franken Man's head rotated and he had to roll out of the way of another electrical discharge that obliterated the floor where he'd just been.

'On what little bright side there is, I think I managed to copy his weapon,' Mega Man tried to play up the situation.

"If you think to use my weapon against me, know that it is pointless," Franken Man stated as he charged forward. "I was born of the lightning! I cannot be harmed by it!"

Mega Man rolled to the side as Franken Man cratered the floor with his fist, and then proceeded to rip it sideways through the stone to backhand the smaller robot.

"Ung!" the blue bomber grunted as he impacted the wall, right before pushing off quickly to barely avoid another shot of Franken Man's electrical weapon. He didn't even have time to check the copied schematics for the name.

"Your base weapon is pitiful," Franken Man strode forward without speed or concern. "And none of the ones from my fellow Fear Masters will be able to save you."

"Funny," Mega Man retorted as he formed his arm cannon back into a hand, which then ignited with multi-colored flame that he formed into a ball, "I seem to recall you being vulnerable to fire. Disco Inferno!"

The fireball flew true and struck Franken Man dead on, igniting the padded material he was covered with, but Franken Man seemed unconcerned even as his frame burned.

"Use all the flames you like, false peacemaker," Franken Man continued to advance despite the damage he had to be suffering every moment he was aflame, "even they cannot save you!"

Franken Man suddenly rushed forward in a charging body slam that blew apart the wall as Mega Man dodged to the side and threw another fireball as he tried to put distance between himself and his opponent. Franken Man grabbed the broken wall and heaved large pieces of rubble in Mega Man's direction and then fired another of his electrical discharges, the Franken Bolt Mega Man finally managed to dedicate enough runtime to determine, at the ceiling above the spot Mega Man dodged towards.

Frantically sliding out from under the falling ceiling, Mega Man looked up to see the flaming boot of Franken Man waiting to stomp on him as he slid straight for it. With no time to think, Mega Man rolled while sliding and was thus only hit by the debris that shot up from the crater Franken Man's stomp created. He flipped into a handstand and fired again from an inverted position and immediately did the split rather than push off as he noted Franken Man changing head-mounted barrels for another Franken Bolt that would have obliterated his torso otherwise.

Mega Man allowed himself to simply roll backwards as he saw Franken Man begin to charge and simply took off running, noting

how devastated the room was looking. Without stopping to think about it, he cut a 90 degree turn, throwing another Disco Inferno fireball at Franken Man as he did and ran towards a corner of the room, switching to his normal Mega Buster as the burning Franken Man pursued him. Catching the barrel change as he glanced behind him, Mega Man dove to the side in a somersault as the Franken Bolt obliterated the corner he'd been headed towards and began shooting the ceiling around his opponent's position repeatedly as he circled to another corner.

"I see what you are trying to do," Franken Man began to run after him, "it will not succeed."

"You sure about that?" Mega Man retorted as he began to charge up and ran straight for Franken Man.

The larger Fear Master hesitated at the sudden change in tactics before switching barrels again, which was all the opening Mega Man needed to slide through his legs ahead of the shot that obliterated the floor behind him and unleashed his charged shot at the far corner of the room, taking out more of the wall. He then kept running as the room began rumbling ominously and dove through the hole he'd just made as the entire ceiling and everything above it came crashing down on his opponent, sending him and everything around him crashing through the lower floors and even the roof of the building below, the crashing sounds growing progressively more faint as they kept punching through floor after floor.

"Yeah! Mega Man brought the house down!" a couple of kids cheered together.

"He did, didn't he?" Roll just managed to not break into a giggling fit.

"So that's it?" another of the children, this one dressed like the Lone Ranger, sounded a bit disappointed. "Mega Man beat them all, the end?"

"Oh, you actually thought that the Fear Masters were operating alone?" Roll teased.

"Yeah, there's always the bad guy's castle too! And the fortress guardians!" the boy next to the previous one, appropriately dressed as Tanto, reminded everyone. "What did Wily's place look like this time?"

"Did you forget?" Roll teased some more. "I told you it *wasn't* Wily this time. Even with communications back up now that Franken Man was beaten, none of us were yet sure *who* was behind it all. As for the fortress guardians, well, my brother didn't have time to establish contact with anyone else because this time... This time, the fortress guardians came looking for him, and they weren't just beasts," she continued as Tango began playing a fast-paced action tune, (33) "they were *super* beasts..."

Mega Man didn't stick around Franken Man's castle just in case the structural damage caused the rest of it to collapse and soon enough found himself on the exterior rooftop overlooking the city. Now that he had a moment, and with the likelihood that jamming was now down, he decided to try and contact his allies.

"This is Mega Man to anyone, do you re–"

BOOM

The rooftop shook with an impact that cut off Mega Man's call for aid and made him stumble to keep his footing. Looking around, the blue bomber quickly found the source of the impact. After all, something that big was hard to miss.

'Of all the things I was expecting, a 50-foot winged metal ant wasn't really at the top of my list,' Mega Man mused to himself as he stared down his newest opponent. (34)

"But ants don't have wings!" a kid in a spider costume complained.

"Some do," Roll informed him.

"Like what?" the kid crossed his arms. The real ones, not the four fakes that stuck out from his costume.

"Like new queens," Roll explained patiently, "so they can fly far away and make a new colony."

"So she was a Killer Queen?" a girl dressed like Alice in Wonderland asked. (35)

"As a matter of fact, she was," Roll smiled. "She even dynamited the rooftop with her laser beams..."

PEW-BOOM!

Rock dove to the side as the Killer Queen fired an exploding laser where he'd been standing and decided that this probably wasn't the best place for a battle. Readying his new weapon, the Franken Bolt, he fired at the giant ant-bot's face.

KRACK-BOOM!

The giant robot shook its head at the impact as Rock took the distraction for all it was worth and ran for the larger machine, noting just how much weapon energy that had taken.

'Best use that sparingly,' he noted as he closed into range of the Killer Queen's razor-sharp mandibles just as it finished shaking off the previous impact and lunged for him. He jumped over the strike and switched to the Wolf Claws, using them to latch onto the armor plating of the Killer Queen's head as he scrambled over it.

The giant robot tried to shake him off, and when that proved unsuccessful it began to buzz its large insectile wings and took off

from its perch on the building to try and throw Mega Man off with acrobatics. Mega Man kept his footing though as he worked his way onto the thorax.

The Killer Queen turned its head to look at him and he fired a couple of Black Sludge blobs into its enlarged eyes that caused the Killer Queen to twist away and try to shake the gunk off, allowing him to take shots at the wings themselves. Deciding on the Cold Spell, he focused his shots on the left wing first, freezing it up so that it no longer buzzed in synch with the right wing, and sending the Killer Queen's flight path tumbling out of control.

Mega Man switched back to the Wolf Claws to hang on as the giant ant robot began to lose altitude fast, plummeting towards the street as it thrashed back and forth. Right before impact, Mega Man jumped off in a calculated tumble as his unwilling ride plowed straight into the hard street, carving a deep furrow in the concrete. After several seconds, the giant machine came to a halt.

Mega Man cautiously approached the prone form to make sure it was down for good, when it suddenly stood up in a frantic burst of movement and turned towards him, firing a laser from its one intact eye. (36)

PEW-BOOM!

Mega Man winced at the heat of the not-quite-dodged blast and returned fire on the Killer Queen, the ant mech twitching whenever his shots found the new rents in its armor even as the rest bounced off the intact portions.

Changing weapons again, this time to the Disco Inferno, Mega Man formed balls of multi-colored flame in each hand and flung them straight at the largest gashes in the giant robot's armor where they ignited the delicate inner workings, quickly spreading into a raging blaze as the Killer Queen twitched and spasmed, before eventually falling inert to the damaged street as the flames consumed its inner workings.

Mega Man breathed heavily to circulate cooling air over his systems. He walked towards a tree lining the sidewalk and leaned against it in an attempt to rest his circuits for a moment, looking upwards like he'd seen humans do sometimes. It was probably the only thing that let him dodge what came next.

"Huh?" a kid in what Roll thought was probably a Robin Hood costume (though she wasn't certain) blinked in confusion. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well..." Roll hmmed for a moment, "how best to put this...? You see, it went like so:" she continued as Tango suddenly changed music to something seemingly lighthearted, and familiar to pretty much everyone present. (37) *"He saw the thing coming out of the sky. It had one long horn, and one big eye. Rock commenced to shaking and he said 'ooo-eee! It looks like a big ol' Purple Devil to me...!'"*

Mega Man frantically slid out of the way as the incoming purple blob smashed down right in the tree he'd been leaning against and rolled to his feet in a three-point combat stance.

The purple blob pulled itself together and rose up to form the familiar shape of the Devil series, complete with singular angry red eye-shaped control unit, the Devil Core, but also with the addition of a long sharp-looking horn, large bat-like wings, and a mouth filled with more needle-like teeth than any self-aware being would be comfortable facing down.

"Hey now, you only eat purple robots, right?" the blue bomber offered the first thing that came to mind as he assessed his newest opponent. "Well, I'm blue and all, so clearly you don–"

BLOP went the spray of purple goo from one of the Purple Devil's arms, completely coating the blue bomber and temporarily staining his armor purple.

"Okay," Mega Man sighed as he wiped some of the goo from his face, "I suppose I asked for–whoa!" Cutting himself off, the currently not-so-blue bomber jumped out of the way of a heat ray from the Purple Devil's optics and watched as the opening over the control unit closed and the body mass began to break up and launch itself at him.

Dancing around the large projectiles, Mega Man took special note of the ones that seemed to carry along the needle teeth. The whole process was complicated by the fact that the horn was hovering overhead and repeatedly trying to stab down at him even as the blobs flew past parallel to the ground. But he somehow managed to get through with only a few scratches and opened fire the moment the purple body mass slid open to reveal the control unit.

"RROOOAAARR!" the Purple Devil bellowed in fury at the hits and flapped its wings hard, propelling Mega Man off his feet from the sudden gale and tried blasting him from the optic control unit, this time with a freeze ray.

"Ow!" Mega Man yelped as he tried to twist out of the way of the blast and got clipped by it. Landing hard on his feet, he readied himself as the Purple Devil began to break its body apart again, the horn detaching to hover overhead and this time the wings detached on their own and began spinning as they moved to come at Mega Man from the sides while the main body mass broke up and shot itself from straight ahead.

"Dr. Light to Mega Man!" the robot hero's comm flared to life. "Dr. Light to Mega Man! Come in Mega Man!"

"A little busy...!" Mega Man retorted shortly as he did his best to keep from getting pummeled from almost every direction.

"That's fine!" Dr. Light allowed. "We received your transmission and have locked onto your position! I've sent for Duo and he's curren–what? Who are you? What are you doing he–"

The transmission cut off abruptly as the Purple Devil finished reforming.

"Okay," Mega Man glared at his opponent as he chose his weapon and aimed straight for the optical control unit, "I officially no longer have time for this. FRANKEN BOLT!"

KRACK-BOOM!

The electrical discharge punched straight through the Devil Core and the purple mass began to lose cohesion as it spread out in a purple puddle. But Mega Man wasn't watching. He was already calling Rush in to track down his father and find out what had happened.

"What happened to Dr. Light?" one of the adults present asked, caught up in the tale as much as the children.

"It's..." Roll trailed off as she tried to think of how to explain as Tango changed tracks to a disturbing tune. (38) "Well... Rock was about to find out, no matter how much he'd later wish he hadn't..."

Mega Man ran after Rush as the robo dog used his suite of tracking abilities to locate Dr. Light, ignoring the increasing number of grinning lighted Jack-o-Lantern faces that were probably Jack-o-METs in disguise as well as the distinct feeling that he was heading straight into a trap.

Rush suddenly barked a warning and Mega Man looked up just in time to be able to sidestep an irregular soccer ball-sized object before it hit him. Turning to look at it, he was startled to find that he knew precisely what the thing was.

It was Boogie Man's severed head.

"Huh?" a fidgety boy in an angel costume interrupted (the fidgeting likely due to the cast on his arm). "Didn't he blow himself up?"

"Don't you know anything?" another boy who looked like the first's twin, save for the traditional devil costume, retorted. "The robot masters almost always get revived for a rematch!"

"Then who got there before Mega Man?" the angel boy huffed, causing the devil boy to look blank for a moment before his face screwed up in confusion.

"A good question," Roll allowed, "and one that didn't have nearly as pleasant an answer as you might think..."

Mega Man advanced cautiously, the confused whines of Rush sending mental alarms blaring in his processors. As he got closer, he saw more decimated remains of the Fear Masters. Ghost Woman had been shoved head-first through a wall, while in a tangible state, and he didn't care to inspect whatever remained of the parts he couldn't see; Dracu Man had his lower jaw torn off, along with half his torso still attached to it; Wolf Man looked like something had clawed his eyes out, the gashes going halfway into his cranial unit; Mummy Man had been impaled feet-first by Boogie Man's decapitated body while the torn halves of Gill Man rested on either side of him, oozing black sludge liberally; Witch Woman's head was the largest intact piece of her left, and it was now firmly attached to the end of her broom; and Franken Man... Franken Man had apparently had his arms ripped off and been beaten into sparking scrap metal with them.

And in the middle of this carnage, his labcoat in tatters, stood none other than Dr. Light.

"Rock... my boy..." the scientist greeted his son with a haunted pained look in his eyes as Rush began whining louder, the robo dog utterly unable to comprehend whatever it was he was sensing, "I'm so sorry... He... he said it would let me help you... would let me

protect you... let me help fight all the suffering... but... I can't control it... I can't even look at a robot anymore... not even you... not without... wanting to take... that suffering..."

Dr. Light's body began to twitch and stretch, the scientist seeming to try and fight it. And losing badly.

"out..."

His portly frame shrank to a whipcord-thin one, with clear muscles.

"of..."

The mass lost from the thinning of his body was made up as his limbs and torso stretched out into a lanky parody of himself, sharp-nailed fingers curling into claws.

"your..."

The look in Dr. Light's bloodshot eyes turned from haunted to manic, veins bulging grotesquely as his mouth split into a foaming grin. (39)

"HYDE!"

"Before anyone asks," Roll pause awkwardly as she noted how many visiting parents were now clutching their wide-eyed children protectively, "my brother and I talked this over and we agree that last word was spelled with a 'y' instead of an 'i'... Anyway, my brother was in a pretty bad situation. If hurting others was abhorrent to him, then hurting our father, crazed state or not, was completely unthinkable..."

Rush stood protectively in front of Mega Man, alternating between warning barks and whines as Hyde Light advanced on the two. The dog's programming pulled hard in two directions, one for loyalty to his partner, and a deeper one forbidding all harm to a human being unless another human was in danger. An impasse that Hyde Light

was clearly very aware of as he dashed forward, grabbing Rush and lifting him over his head and pulling with both hands.

"RUSH!" Mega Man yelled as the screech of tearing metal tore the air, the two halves of his companion falling to the ground. "Mega Man to Light Labs!" he frantically called out even as he dodged Hyde Light's following charge and began to retreat from successive assaults. "Emergency recall for unit Rush, authorization: Rock Light, Sierra Oscar November India Charlie!"

Rush's two halves vanished in a teleportation beam as Mega Man continued to dodge around the swipes of his rabidly transformed father.

"Stand still and die, worthless robot!" Hyde Light ordered.

'Override: Dr. Light not in his right mind,' Mega Man countered the command, but the distraction was enough for one of Hyde Light's arm sweeps to clip his side and send the robot sprawling from the immensely surprising power behind the blow.

"Destroy all robots!" the foaming mad doctor exulted as he dashed forwards.

'Think!' Mega Man demanded of himself as he barely slid out of the way. *'Do I have absolutely* anything *left that I can use to restrain dad without hurting him?'*

He dodged swipes as he cataloged his options. The Franken Bolt, Wolf Claw, and Disco Inferno were vetoed immediately for being potentially lethal. The Desert Laser, Black Sludge, and Cold Spell were given cursory consideration before he concluded that he didn't know enough about possible side effects of using them on Dr. Light's current state to risk them. Matter Phase might delay the inevitable, but it wouldn't improve things as they stood. Hypnotic Gaze on the other hand...

"Gotcha!" Hyde Light grabbed the blue bomber in his distraction and hefted him to eye level with a manic gleam. "Now you will d...ie...?" he trailed off as his gaze caught the hypnotic pulsing of his captive's eyes.

"Dad..." Mega Man pleaded in a calm, measured tone, "this isn't you... I know it isn't... You don't hate robots... you love them and the potential they represent..."

Mega Man was heartened by the way the madness seemed to fade from his father's eyes and his grip loosened just a bit as his limbs just barely seemed to fill out from their whipcord-thin state.

"You love working on them... building them up instead of tearing them apart... making them to help others with their lives... you're the one who taught me to seek ways other than violence... to work for peace even when others want only war and conflict... Please, dad... come back to me..."

Hyde Light grunted and shook his head, his grip tightening again as the slight transformation reversal stopped. Mega Man blinked in alarm and checked his systems, already dreading the answer he would find.

'I'm out...' he realized as he checked the weapon energy for Hypnotic Gaze. It was completely empty. He just hadn't had enough to finish talking his father around.

"Nice try," Hyde Light grinned sadistically, "now D–"

Both Mega Man and Hyde Light were thrown off of their feet by a sudden impact nearby, the transformed doctor losing his grip on his captive.

"I see I have not arrived too late," the noble voice of Duo spoke as he dashed out of the impact zone and thrust his giant palm, glowing with the gentle blue light of Justice energy that he commanded, over the prone doctor, the light infusing Light's body as he thrashed in

Duo's grip. "Mega Man, I am afraid that your father is infected with something very foul. I can extract it, but it will not be pleasant at all. What say you?"

"Do it," Mega Man coughed as he got to his feet.

The avatar of Justice nodded and the blue energy began to pull at Hyde Light, who screamed in pain as the blue light slowly but surely came away with a void-black energy in its grip, Dr. Light slowly turning back to normal as it was extracted before falling unconscious.

Mega Man looked at the viscous void-black... substance... in Duo's giant hand before shivering and turning away. He walked over to his father and knelt to check on his vitals. Exausted, but physically the man would be fine.

"Mega Man to Light Labs," he began.

"Mega Man!" the voice of his sister yelled back over the line, "what happened?! I saw how Rush came back and–"

"Later, sis," he cut Mega Woman off. "I need emergency medical teleportation for dad. Keep in mind that he may need to be restrained for his own safety due to exposure to an unknown substance. Can you take care of it?"

"...Of course," Mega Woman replied after a pause. "Stand by for teleportation."

Mega Man took a teleporter locator out of his arm and placed it on his father's chest. A few seconds later and the man had vanished in a beam of light.

"You were quite fortunate tonight," Duo spoke as he approached, having finished disposing of the foul energy that had possessed Mega Man's father. "That substance is among the most foul I have

ever encountered. Had it been left any longer there is not telling wha–glgk..."

Duo was cut off as a pointed black tendril suddenly pierced through his back and out his chest. Mega Man blinked in shock before the thing retracted as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Duo!" the blue bomber ran to the larger robot's side as he scanned for threats. The only things he could see were the grinning Jack-o-Lantern faces that surrounded the area. "Don't worry. Light Labs! This is Mega Man! Emergency transport for Duo! I repeat–"

Mega Man cut off as he felt Duo's giant hand grab his arm and a rush of energy filled his systems.

"Mega Man... do you... well... with it..." the alien defender spoke with great strain and seriousness as he transferred his own energy into the blue bomber's smaller body before disappearing in a beam of light.

Mega Man blinked at the odd instructions before he was cut off by echoing laughter. He turned this way and that, trying to spot the source in the deep impenetrable shadows that now surrounded him, broken only by the grinning lights of what he was sure were Jack-o-METs. It took him a few seconds to realize that the reason he couldn't pinpoint the source of the sound was because...

...it was coming from inside his head.

Roll gulped and steadied her breathing routines. Her audience didn't dare make a sound. They all found this terrifying, made even more so by the fact that the storyteller herself seemed frightened.

Steadying herself, Roll closed her eyes and continued the story as Tango began to play a new song, this time with lyrics that didn't quite match the original. But few payed the lyrics any mind as they

focused on Roll's words. (40) Several who did catch certain lines wished they hadn't…

As he kept scanning the surrounding shadows, Mega Man was beginning to realize that the voice wasn't exactly a voice. It was more like... more like something was implanting the concept of a laughing voice in his head and letting his mind interpret from there.

Whatever the case, it was seriously creeping him out. Even more when music started to play along with the voice as it did growls, sinister breathing, echoing yells, and more laughter. A sudden guitar riff was punctuated by a painful impact from behind that flung him to the ground, and he only just caught a glimpse of a void-black tendril retreating back into the shadows.

Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm a man of... unique taste.

He looked around for the source of the attack and missed it when another tendril grabbed his leg from the opposite direction and tossed him into the air.

I've been around for longer than they think, driven many a man quite insane.

He saw a third tendril emerge from the shadows to strike him from the air and activated the Matter Phase, turning intangible so it would pass through him and he could recover. He was thus very surprised when the tendril slammed into him as if he hadn't gone intangible at all.

He cried out in pain as he impacted the ground hard, but the voice that wasn't quite a voice just kept singing.

I was there for António Moniz who wanted to ease patients' pain.

A new tendril snaked towards him leisurely and he switched to the Wolf Claws to try and damage it somehow, but the tendril ignored the cuts as it wrapped around him.

Whispered that the best way was to carve a piece out of their brains.

Mega Man clawed at the tendril holding him repeatedly, but the cuts healed as fast as he could inflict them and he was flung into a shadowed wall, bouncing off with a pained cry.

He landed and rolled to his feet as the voice laughed again.

Pleased to meet you! Hope you guess my name!

Multiple tendrils snaked out of the shadows and waved at him mockingly and he switched to the Black Sludge weapon, only to watch the viscous substance be absorbed into the tendrils like water into parched ground.

But what's puzzling you is the nature of my game...

'What are these things?!' Mega Man tried to evade them as they all struck at once.

I worked there in Pennhurst State where all the mad kids stayed!

He went back to his normal Mega Buster shots as he dodged around, only for the tendrils to completely ignore his hits as if they were no more dangerous than raindrops.

Showed the staff they weren't human and... took the time to play!

One of the tendrils grabbed his arm and flung him at another that wound up and whipped around like it was a baseball bat to hit him back into the ground.

Worked the rounds, earned a doctorate!

Mega Man got his hands under him as he skidded along and came up, firing the Desert Laser repeatedly to no effect.

For the Third Reich's ways of enforcing hate!

The voice gave a pleased yell as Mega Man was blindsided by another tendril from behind, sending him tumbling hard.

Pleased to meet you! Hope you guess my name, oh yeah!

Mega Man grunted as he got to his feet to see the tendrils waving at him mockingly again and opened fore with the Cold Spell.

Is it puzzling you to the nature of my game...? Haha!

The tendrils didn't even slow their movements as the freezing energy hit and burst into unimpeded movement with the next refrain.

I watch with glee while your leaders all argue the best way for persecution plays!

Mega Man ignited his hands with the Disco Inferno and did his best to parry the strikes, but the flames failed to harm the tendrils any more than his bare hands would.

And I shout out 'who took all the kiddies?' when the whole time it was always me!

And then one grabbed him around the neck and began slamming him into the pavement in time to the music.

So let me please introduce myself! I'm a man of... unique taste!

The tendril released him at least and Mega Man stood painfully, grabbing an E-Tank and wondering why the tendrils didn't stop him from downing it.

And I helped all those terrorists get themselves psyched to die on 9/11!

In fact, the tendrils had all retreated for no apparent reason as the voice kept singing directly to his mind.

Pleased to meet you! Hope you guessed my name, oh yeah!

Mega Man heard what sounded like footsteps approaching at a leisurely pace.

And it's just killing you, the... nature of my game... HAHA!

What was really disturbing him about those footsteps was that he couldn't tell if the sound was real or something else being projected into his head.

Just so pleased to meet you! But you couldn't guess my name, oh well...

A foot in a fine pitch black dress shoe emerged from the shadows. It was attached to an unnaturally, impossibly, thin leg covered by void-black dress slacks.

It's just too confusing for you... the nature of this game...

The leg was attached to an even more unnaturally thin torso clad in a proportionately thin black suitcoat over a ghostly white button-up shirt and a crimson tie.

You see now, every hero is a monster, and all the madmen sane.

Mega Man unleashed a Franken Bolt at the figure, only for the immense electrical discharge to fizzle as it struck the ghostly white palm of the figure's hand.

You will soon understand...

The figure's stark-white head emerged from the shadows last and Mega Man was taken aback at the total and complete lack of facial features upon it.

I am the Slenderman...

And waving from the figure's back were the same black tendrils that had been knocking him around effortlessly. The sheer impossibility of the being's anatomy hurt Mega Man's processors just to look at it.

And I'm gonna break your mind today!

Mega Man took stock of his options and decided to go for it, switching to the Wolf Claw and charging, determined to take this... unnatural thing... out if it was the last thing he did.

The Slenderman stood calmly as the hero charged and right before he struck, the tendrils from his back lashed out and grabbed each of the robot's limbs, pulling them taut so he couldn't do anything.

The blank face then moved to within inches of Mega Man's own as the music continued, accompanied by images of pain, suffering, betrayal, paranoia, and all the torments that existed in the words as well as the conceptual certainty that he was facing a creature that was truly unbeatable, completely invincible, and there was nothing he could possibly do that would change that.

It... was hopeless...

"But..." a boy dressed like none other than Roll's brother and the hero of the story sniffed back tears, "but Mega Man would never give up! No matter what! ...Right?"

"Silly," Roll smiled, "of *course* he wouldn't..."

Mega Man leaned his head back as the images assaulted him with the idea of his unshakeable powerlesslness, and whipped it forward to crack the forehead gem in his helmet square on the spot of Slenderman's face where a nose should have been.

The deluge of troubling images halted abruptly as Slenderman jerked back from the impact, though Mega Man was sure it was more from surprise than anything and a few of the tendrils loosened their grip.

Mega Man wasted no time in tearing his legs and one still-clawed arm free to slash at Slenderman's featureless fact, only for the entity to bring a hand up and stop the blow cold while giving him the blankest stare in the multiverse as sensations of bemused incredulity entered the blue bomber's mind.

Mega Man retorted by following up the blocked blow with a double foot-plant into Slenderman's face that was rewarded with a contemptuous fling of the tendril still wrapped around his other arm.

The blue bomber flipped around in the air and spotted the tendrils already coming for him. Grabbing one before it could hit him, he swung around to propel himself back at Slenderman, twisting around follow-up blows to land right in front of the entity and receive a calm kick to the sternum.

Mega Man bent over from the blow and reflexively clawed the limb that had struck him, getting only sensations of annoyance in return as he failed to even tear the cloth.

'Well, I think I made him angry at least,' he thought to himself as instead of retracting, the Slenderman's foot lifted him up, over his opponent's head in a way no human or robot could possibly bend, to slam him into the ground on the other side. Only Mega Man planted his arms first and began a spinning handstand while holding his legs out that knocked his opponent's other leg out from under him.

Except the Slenderman didn't fall. He held himself up with his tendrils in a relaxed pose until his feet were firmly back under him as Mega Man sprang back and began firing. As shot after shot of the offensive Fear Masters' weapons left his arm cannon, the Slenderman simply stood there unconcerned as he was struck time after time.

Images assaulted the blue bomber's mind in the same way his shots assaulted his opponent. Images of the devastation continued conflict would bring. The death and pain his resistance would cause. The siren call to just... give up.

"Never!" Mega Man yelled as his arm cannon clicked empty of further master weapons and he dashed forward with a punch that Slenderman casually caught in his tendrils.

The sensation of mocking laughter hit him as he was tossed aside, along with images of what people thought of his determination and sacrifice. The decadence of someone always there to fix their problems and clean their messes. The ignorance of his feelings and pain since he was clearly just a tool. A lowly robot to be used and discarded when he was finished and replaced with something newer and shinier. A new weapon to point at their enemies so they didn't have to actually talk with them. Because people were lazy and distrustful and vile things. Creatures that squandered their gifts in favor of doling out suffering to each other rather than even entertain the thought of trying to understand each other.

"You're wrong..." Mega Man growled out as he stood and charged back in, Mega Buster charging. He jumped over one tendril, slid under another, and vaulted between two more and unleashed a charged shot right in Slenderman's face.

But the Slenderman didn't even flinch as he lunged forward through the ball of plasma, only to find that Mega Man was ready for this as he twisted in a practiced maneuver to push Slenderman's head from behind even as he swept the entity's feet from the front. Slenderman went tumbling face-first from the throw, and twisted in impossible

ways to end up back on his feet with impeccable posture and contemptuously brushing dust off of his suit.

The Slenderman then leveled its blank gaze at Mega Man and crossed his arms behind his back. The parade of images came with renewed vigor, showing the robot hero the worst of the very humanity he had sworn to defend. The clear question behind each one being 'why do you even bother?'

Mega Man grit his teeth and clenched his fists as he focused past the images assaulting his mind. Focused towards better things. Of people helping each other. The friends and family he knew who repeatedly sacrificed to help others. Of those like his father who worked tirelessly towards the dream of a better future. And even of those like Dr. Wily who for all their faults still had redeeming qualities worth defending.

"Because I believe in them!" the blue bomber yelled as he threw all his strength and focus into a punch to the head that sent his opponent staggering slightly from the blow.

For an instant, Mega Man swore he saw a single scratch on Slenderman's face, but it was gone in the same instant as if it was never there.

"But miss Roll!" a boy dressed like some version of the Mad Hatter protested. "How could he win if this Slenderman guy couldn't be hurt?"

"That's a good question," Roll seemed to pause and think about it. "Okay, you all know what my brother and I have fought, right?"

A chorus of confused, but still eager, nods was the reply.

"Mad scientists, war machines, giant robots, alien conquerors, challengers from the future, insane supercomputers, and beings so strong they might as well have been *gods* ," Roll listed off.

"Slenderman was nothing more than an entity that preyed on human fear, distrust, pain, and paranoia; drawing his fearful strength from it. Do *any* of you think, for one *second* , that my brother *couldn't* beat something like that?"

Everyone in the room, child and adult alike, exchanged questioning glances for a moment before they all shook their heads in the negative.

"Exactly," Roll winked. "You all believe in him, the same way he believes in all of you. And, you see, Rock *knows* this. He knew it well enough to take that belief, along with the power Duo had entrusted him with, and *use* it..."

"So *that's* your weakness," Mega Man narrowed his eyes as he studied his opponent. "You're a thought entity... You take people's greatest fears and become the invincible horror they imagine, but it stops working when your victims stop buying into it, right?"

Mega Man felt the narrowing focus of his opponent's attention on him and knew he'd hit the bullseye.

Slenderman's tendrils suddenly started attacking aggressively, forcing Mega Man to dodge as he tried to focus on the thoughts from before.

"Mega Man... do you... well... with it..."

A warming sensation carried through his body as he felt the energy Duo had given him react to his need and bolster his hopeful thoughts even as it blocked out the torturous images the Slenderman tried to send. He began to focus all of that power into his fists as his opponent suddenly decided to begin charging personally.

"Oh!" the boy dressed like Mega Man interrupted again. "I know how this goes! Rock told me this technique last time he was here! Let's

see... he said... um... My hand... no... this hand is... shimmering...?"

The boy suddenly looked utterly and completely heartbroken to discover that he'd forgotten the cool thing his hero had told him.

"This hand of mine glows with an azure hue... Its noble voice tells me to defend the innocent..."

"JUSTICE..."

Mega Man ducked under the Slenderman's strike and threw a glowing blue body blow as he finished his battle cry.

"...ONE!"

The Slenderman practically folded in half from the blow and his tendrils all went limp at the same time.

"Rock!" the children all yelled out as they recognized the boy standing at the back of the room opposite Roll, even though he was dressed in a green tunic with a matching floppy cap, leather boots and gloves, and a shield and sword strapped to his back.

"Did that take care of the Slenderman?" was asked from multiple directions.

"Not quite," Rock smiled back and crouched down in a stance for an uppercut. "He needed another dose of..."

"JUSTICE TWO!" Mega Man yelled as his glowing blue uppercut snapped Slenderman's head back and sent him flying through the air before impacting limply on the ground where he began to dissolve back into the shadows from whence he came.

"K! O!" a two boys in white and red martial arts gis and a girl in a blue chinese battle dress with her hair done up in buns led the enthusiastic cheers of the room. (41)

From her position, Roll gave a bemused smile at her brother. "What are you doing here, Rock? No... wait, let me guess. You let Auto do the decorating again, didn't you?"

"Actually," Rock smiled back, "you were taking a bit longer than we expected, so I came to walk you back. It'd be a shame to teleport considering what the mayor did with the city."

There was a round of chuckles across the room from the adults. Mayor Leonardo Dorado was a character to be sure, but there was no denying that the man knew how to get into the spirit of the holidays. Any of them. (42)

"Awww..." the kids groaned as Roll walked up to her brother, clearly intending to leave. "Do you *have* to go miss Roll?" a girl dressed in a stereotypical magical girl costume tugged pleadingly on Roll's witch dress with her only hand.

"Sorry," Roll knelt down and ruffled the girl's hair, "my family needs me too. And besides, I'll come back soon with another story."

"Promise?"

"Always," Roll smiled as she stood and joined her brother at the door.

"Rock?" a kid dressed like a chibi parody of Cthulu asked as the twins moved to exit the room. "Did all of that actually happen?"

"Well," Rock looked around at the expectant faces and smiled conspiratorially as he turned translucent, "you tell me..." He then stepped back and phased through the closed door he'd entered from.

"Whoa..." many of the children breathed in amazement. A few of the adults gaped in astonishment themselves.

Roll just shook her head in amused exasperation before opening the door and walking through with Tango.

"Okay, I have to admit, the mayor's outdone himself again," Roll smiled as she took in the lights from the city. Someone had apparently figured out how to light up the sides of the buildings so they showed a myriad of stereotypically spooky scenes.

"Thought you'd like that," Rock smiled to himself as the two continued on their way back to Light Labs. "You know... I really appreciate you doing that for me."

"Doing what?" Roll blinked.

"Telling that story almost every Loop," Rock clarified. "It honestly helps me deal with what happened that time. Some of the things that the Fear Masters did... What the Slenderman *tried* to do..."

Rock shuddered at the memory.

Roll punched him in the arm.

"Ow!" Rock complained. "What happened to comforting hugs?"

"You weren't in a 'hold me' mope," Roll smirked, "it was more of a 'I need a swift kick' mope. And besides, the Slenderman didn't know what he was getting into when he tried to run you through the wringer. An embodiment of fear and paranoia versus the hope of the world several times over? Seriously, advantage: You."

"If you say so," Rock admitted a little too easily. "The fact is I still almost lost to him. I could feel him getting into my head. Trying to turn me in a way that I'm certain would have lasted a lot longer than a single Loop."

"Yet you still beat him down with your bare hands," Roll deadpanned.

"And who was responsible for that?" Rock retorted. "Who was it that figured out his weakness and then pulled off a global broadcast so she could plead with the world to place their faith in me? Who was it that convinced enough people to believe that Slenderman's invincibility crumbled? I'm pretty sure that was you." (43)

"You say that like getting people to put their faith in you is hard. Heck, Wily was ranting that if you could beat him so many times, then an upstart like Slenderman shouldn't be a problem."

Rock snorted in amusement. "Yeah, I can see him doing that. Still, what was it you said to the world that Loop? 'Believe in the one who believes in you?' Who did you hear that from again?"

"That nice Kamina guy I met in a fused Loop with the Avengers. The same one who gave me the shades I like to take trick or treating to Skull Castle for when Wily slams the gate. You know, to get into the mood for 'trick'." (44)

"So that's what you keep needing all the eggs and toilet paper for..." Rock snorted in amusement. "That must have been the Loop I was with the Justice League."

"Anyway, what's everyone wearing this year?"

"Well, Kalinka decided to dress like a girl Frankenstein Monster with her dad as the mad scientist. She also somehow managed to talk Pharaoh Man and Skull Man into dressing as each other..."

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*) Thanks to Dark-heika, Thanatos's Scribe, Leonite, Gamerex27, and Oraclemask who helped come up with costume ideas for the kids. Thanks to KageX for suggesting several of the standard foes and sub-bosses.

1) The candy's for the kids. Just in case that wasn't clear. If it was, give yourself a cookie. (Feel free to substitute Halloween candy for cookies at any time)

2) They're creepy and they're kooky. Mysterious and spooky. They're altogether ooky. The Lights at Halloween!

The Addams Family theme by Vic Mizzy: www. youtube watch? v=q9d-yzDA9Mc

Instrumental version: www. youtube watch? v=hIJoTEliQcU

3) Auto… Auto has issues.

4) Zombie Joe... Zom, Zombie Joe uh-huh...

No, that's not the song. Though if you recognize it, give yourself a cookie. Heck, anytime you recognize one of the songs I'm providing links for, give yourself a cookie.

Perc-U-Later by Dino Pacifici: www. youtube watch? v=Ybgkk4jLCGg

5) Who *are* you going to call?

Ghostbusters Movie Title Theme by Elmer Bernstein: www. youtube watch? v=UgBVMBe2ltQ

6) You knew I was going to have to say it at *some* point.

7) If you have *any* idea who Louie the Lightningbug is, then give yourself *two* cookies.

8) And wouldn't you know it, there was a full moon that night too…

Bad Moon Rising by Creedence Clearwater Revival: www. youtube watch? v=zUQiUFZ5RDw

Instrumental version: www. youtube watch? v=3PmA4Mv5Ikk

9) Awww... It's a little Red Riding Werewolf…

10) If you recognize this description as the Wolf Bot from the Megaman Cartoon episode 'Night of the Living Monster Bots', give yourself another cookie. It might be spoiling a few things, but that episode of the cartoon is what inspired the Fear Masters in general, as well as providing half of them right off the bat.

11) Some of them actually thought it was the overture to the Phantom of the Opera. Which is actually what I was going to use before I remembered Bach.

Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor by Johann Sebastian Bach: www. youtube watch? v=ipzR9bhei_o

12) Seriously, saying that to someone like Mega Man takes balls of ... *realizes the horrible, horrible pun I'm about to say and shuts up* ...Never mind.

13) O_O

14) Reminds of a line from the Freefall webcomic: "You gotta admit it's pretty." "Many things that can kill you are."

Witchy Woman by Eagles: www. youtube watch? v=eVXqocPAz1k

Instrumental version: www. youtube watch? v=tSSdcKpPi9A

15) *blinks* Did I just end up using Snow White's appearance to describe a witch?

16) I swear, I did *not* plan this part of Witch Woman's personality beforehand. It just came out as I was writing.

17) Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to find a track that gave this feeling?

The Crypt by Jerry Goldsmith from The Mummy: www. youtube watch? v=mBSL9N8_rto

18) Okay, I'll admit, sometimes I'm just amusing myself.

19) They just never seemed to when he fought them.

20) Because I know some of you had to have been wondering the same thing.

21) I apologize for the B-grade movie science.

22) The kind of music that makes a person want to run inside and lock the doors before any of those hidden dangers manages to find them.

The Fog Main Theme by John Carpenter: www. youtube watch? v=yNSLaYJboPE

23) Based on the giant Kerog robot Shadow Man can summon in Power Fighters 2

24) He's... not entirely incorrect in that assumption.

25) The Bogey like to Boogie.

Boogie Fever by Sylvers: www. youtube watch? v=po1GKXo0SuE

Instrumental version: www. youtube watch? v=uUy9FMin3Zs

26) You know, a Joker grin.

27) Oh, come on. That pun was just *begging* to be used...

28) Top Man: He totally learned that move from me!

Me: You know that wasn't the Top Spin, right?

Top Man: Don't care, he totally learned that from me!

29) Classic movie monsters represent a lot of things that people are afraid of, but I decided to focus my attention on what I consider key

aspects. If this isn't your cup of tea, just skip down to footnote 30.

Zombie Joes: The idea that the dead can rise out of the grave is an old one, even if the modern zombie apocalypse scenario is much newer than most people think. It likely began with the fact that certain substances can put a person into a near death state, which can at times be so close to the real thing that they can fool some modern diagnosis techniques. Imagine how terrified people must have been when what they thought was a dead body woke up. In fact, I recall a Science channel episode about real life zombies, practiced by some of the less savory followers of Vodun (aka Voodoo). They poison someone into a near death state, dig up their coffin later, and keep them so drugged that they can only shamble about their lives in a suggestive haze until the drugs stop being administered. Scary stuff.

Ghost Woman: People have been spooked by things they can't explain for about as long as they've been explaining things. The explanations vary; gods, spirits, ghosts, ESP, dimensional convergences, psychokinetic phenomena, etc; but the general theme of that-which-cannot-be-explained persists in pretty much all cultures.

Wolf Man: Putting aside the transformation issues, lycanthropes in general are very much a representation of humanity's animal side. As much as we like to claim otherwise, we're still part of the animal kingdom, with all of the primal instincts that entails. Instincts which most of us do our best to suppress and which frighten us when they come to the forefront. But those instincts remain an important and inextricable part of us.

Dracu Man: Ah, the vampires. The classification of undead bloodsuckers is frightening enough by itself, but the fact that vampires so often tend to be portrayed as aristocratic, such as with Count Dracula himself, is very telling. As is the fact that he was based on Vlad Tepes, Prince of Wallachia and a member of the House of Drăculești (who by some accounts I've heard was *worse* than the fictional character based on him). The concept of people in

power who do not have to answer for the atrocities they commit is a very scary one indeed. Next time you see a character who acts like their money or position protects them from reprisal, imagine them with a pair of bloody fangs and see how well it fits.

Witch Woman: Oh, boy. This isn't even about the magic. Seriously, the accusation of magic use was often an excuse to persecute others who didn't fit into the community. Essentially "that woman over there doesn't walk like us, talk like us, act like us, or think like us, and she has the gall to smile while we suffer the ordinary pains we always suffer, why she must be a witch who has cursed us with misfortune!" People have always feared what was different, and few bear the brunt of this more than the *people* who are different.

Mummy Man: Curses and reanimated dead guys are one thing, but the promise of immortality is at least as old as the ancient Egyptians and the practice of mummification they believed would enable that immortality in the afterlife. Eternal life is an enticing thing and the lengths some will go to possess it are truly terrifying. Think about it. Every megalomaniac in fiction who rants about living forever is simply following in the footsteps of the mummies.

Gill Man: Also known as The Creature From the Black Lagoon. Go deep enough beneath the waves and you'll find an environment so alien that it might as well be on another planet. The creatures of the deep were speaking to our fears of alien beings long before the term was ascribed to things from outer space. That's right, the green men from mars are successors to this guy.

Boogie Man: Ignoring the music pun, people have been afraid of the concept of pure evil ever since we've been able to grasp the very concept of evil. The idea that something can exist without the positive traits of love, kindness, compassion, hope, etc. is one that simultaneously intrigues our curiosity and causes our minds to retreat from the sheer wrongness that would entail. And yet, there's some truth to the idea. Sociopathy is a thing after all.

Franken Man: Ah, a personal favorite. I'm not kidding when I have Roll declare Frankenstein to be a class of terror unto itself. When it was written, the idea that mankind could actually create something that could consciously defy its control was, to my understanding, a new one. Sure, homunculi and golems were older concepts, but they were also unwaveringly obedient to their creator. Dr. Frankenstein and his monster (who would logically have the family name of his creator if you think about it) changed that. Suddenly the idea that mankind could delve so far into the study if the unknown that we couldn't control our own creations wasn't so farfetched. Every creation of man that has been smart and/or strong enough to defy its creator(s) since has harkened back to this one being.

30) He's Alive!

It's Alive by Bobby "Boris" Pickett: www. youtube watch? v=a4tX3yuk2yg

Instrumental version: www. youtube watch? v=ejtqjFPQ1wE

31) Mash is from Mega Man 7, the boss of the half-way stage. As for the pun, I had to. You know I did.

32) Someone kindly linked me to the "What is a man?" speech from the Castlevania series and I adapted it into this.

33) Time to kick it up a notch.

Superbeast by Rob Zombie: www. youtube watch? v=X3-H5jGoags

Instrumental version: www. youtube watch? v=ETkd0WZrT6I

34) Oh, look, it's one of Them. Give yourself a cookie if you get the reference.

35) You can blame Smash Up's latest game expansion for this pun. In fact, have a bonus song:

Killer Queen by Queen: www. youtube watch? v=BAf2S6ij2gk

Instrumental version: www. youtube watch? v=gcTOTki6wnQ

36) You read that right, the Killer Queen faceplanted in the street after plunging from the top of a skyscraper and *got back up* .

37) *giggles to himself*

The Purple People Eater by Sheb Wooley: www. youtube watch? v=DL1ZH0Ke92A

Instrumental version: www. youtube watch? v=vVb_rwIADDU

38) Actually, for what's about to happen, I'm not sure this tune is creepy *enough* ...

Descent Into Madness by Nox Arcana: www. youtube watch? v=Y-r6p7xcQdA

39) *Hides under the covers*

40) Nope, not coming out from under the covers. Have the song link if you must, but leave me in here.

Sympathy for the Devil by The Rolling Stones: www. youtube watch? v=vBecM3CQVD8

41) Is it safe to come out now? *looks around carefully* Oh, good. *checks the resolution of the fight* In case anyone is wondering, Justice One is a technique used by the Battle Network version of Duo (and is available as a Mega Class chip). In this case it's pretty much a Mega Man throwing a straight power punch using Duo's Justice energy and the collective faith the world has in him. Justice Two is basically the Shoryuken using Mega Man's other fist with the same energy behind it.

And, while I'm at it, let's talk about the Fortress bosses I used (feel free to skip if you prefer):

Killer Queen: A double whammy here. Let's face it, little else disturbs us humans as much or as reliably as insects. They're about as different from us as something within the animal kingdom can get and they repeatedly defy our concerted efforts to remove them from our lives. And of course there's the whole hive mind thing with insects like ants. To summarize that, there is a reason fictional groups like the Borg are so scary. Then there's the understandable fear of things that are larger than we are. Deep in our instincts it is written that size does matter, particularly lots of size. So giant insects speak to multiple fears.

Purple Devil: Leaving aside the Purple People Eater gag, there's the very rational fear of being eaten. Predators are not kind to their prey and being lower on the food chain than something else is terrifying. Now, humans are at the top of the food chain for just about every environment we inhabit, but the truth of the matter is that this is not a natural state for us. We like to think of ourselves as omnivores, but we're really what's known as facultate herbivores. Or more specifically facultate fructivores (fruit eaters). Plant/fruit (and vegetable) matter makes up the most necessary part of a healthy diet for us, but the facultate part means we're capable of supplementing our diet with other foods, like meat (corollary: It has been noted by a reader on Spacebattles that meat is an important part of a truly healthy human diet, but the point remains that the necessary nutrition involved *can* be safely extracted from certain plant-based foods or fungi by the human digestive system). We're closer to the omnivorous center of the herbivore/carnivore spectrum than most animals, but we're still firmly on the herbivore side. We also lack the basic tools of a predator, such as sharp claws or talons, or even a large enough mouth to serve as a viable weapon. All the tools we use for hunting are fashioned from external materials. In a nutshell, we evolved as prey animals. And then we got smart enough to claw our way up the food chain by killing and eating the things that tried to kill and eat us (getting even smarter as the protein boost to our diets accelerated brain development), to the point that most apex predators would rather retreat from a human presence than try their luck. But in the back of our instincts is the knowledge that our

position at the top of the food chain is all too precarious and we fear being knocked back down a rung or two.

Hyde Light: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a classic horror story that differs from most in that the terror doesn't come from an external monster. Instead it very distinctly comes from the part within even the noblest of us that is capable of monstrous things.

42) You know that guy who goes overboard with decorating his house for (insert holiday here)? Mayor Dorado's like that except with the whole city and every holiday. Lots of people get good work making that stuff happen.

Bonus Song (for the end credits): Dead Man's Party by Oingo Boingo: www. youtube watch? v=7DPxgoeu5ds

43) And this is as good a time as any to talk about the mastermind I chose for the Halloween special.

Slenderman: Ah, the Slenderman. Slenderman is a terrifying example of the power of human imagination. According to my (admittedly limited) understanding, he got his start in the creepypasta corner of the net where some people were having fun with creepy altered photos and making up spooky stories to go with them. Next thing anyone realizes, the internet has created the most horrifying eldritch abomination since H. P. Lovecraft took up the pen. All of his powers and strength are gleaned entirely from the collective beliefs of those who write and read his mythos. There's some superstitions about him being real now, which would essentially mean that humanity thought him into existence. It's scary, scary stuff for certain.

44) Remember 2013 when Ryan Jampole did thirty one Halloween costumes for Roll? www. youtube watch? v=u7XNOlmzbs4

(Note: The following has been helpfully translated from R'ylehian 1337 and the proliferation of vulgarities filtered out for your convenience)

ForAGoodTimeCallCthulu: Hey guyz! Just got back from Heph's place! Gotta tell you, Roll's story about Slendy's screw-up just gets better every single time! Pics, video, and audience thoughts comin yer wai!

YELLOWKING: HUZZAH! MOAR TALES FOR THE MAD TALE KING!

greenhorror: dude stop shouting

YELLOWKING: NEVAH! THE GREATZ SHOULD ALWAYS BE MADDENINGLY LOUDZ!

SoulzRTazty: Sayz teh guy who married hiz script once...

MyOddaSnakeIssa[I have no idea what this word means, but I have a feeling it should still be censored]: Gotta be better than Nyar marrying that pony once. Ugh! Who gets the hots for symmetrical body types anyway?

MistahSkin42: You all jealous. 'Shy is best waifu!

DaGreatStoner: Lt's ll gt bck n tpc. Ths s bt Slnd bng n dt ftr ll.

RedFunk: Aw man, your vowels broke again?! But Stoner's right. This is about Slendy's totally Epic Fail. Man, that never gets old!

SimulatedGoatGod: Yeah, Slendy effed up big time. Honestly, doing the whole 'embodiment-of-fear-that-can-only-be-harmed-if-enough-believe' thing against the hero types? Not even those tools Phobos and Deimos are dumb enough to try *that*.

Daddy'sLittleEldritchHorror: Eh, he's still a total n00b the mortals in the Hub thought into existence. Thinks that Ascending from the

sheer amount of terror he inspired makes him a 'special little rotting flower'.

Fiyah666: Yah. Guy should totally get over himself or GTFO.

Sl3nd3r1: I hate all of you...

Happy Halloween everyone!

Mega Loops 11

Mega Loops 11

Author's Note: Regarding the part of my footnotes in the last chapter that went into human dietary needs: It actually *should* be possible for humans to get all our vital nutrients from meat. The trick? You have to eat organ meat to do that (that's right, liver really is good for you). The parts of animals that most humans think of as 'icky' (plus stuff like bone marrow and whatnot, so basically the whole animal). Something no real carnivore would view them as. So, I guess we still count as omnivores, but with a distinct natural preference for herbivorous habits.

11.? (EdBecerra)

A dusty, shaggy grey figure approached, holding up a placard at the end of a stick.

Hello, Cousin

"How dare you address me so familiarly, you - you..."

The sign flipped around, exposing the other side.

Coyote. That's the word you're looking for, cousin Wily. Wile E. Coyote, Super Genius.

Scott Summers, aka Cyclops, wandered around the Xavier institute, wondering what particular variation of events this Loop would throw at him when the doorbell rang.

Blinking behind his red shades, he walked over and opened it to find what appeared to be a young boy dressed in red with brown hair in a

pompadour and wearing shades of his own. Black ones that looked almost like a visor.

It wasn't a face Scott recalled seeing, well, ever.

"Are you lost?" he asked the boy.

"That depends," the boy responded evenly, "is this the Xavier institute for gifted youngsters?"

"Well... yes..." Scott continued blinking. He thought the boy might be a visiting looper, but usually the visiting loopers popped up in New York, in space, or as members of S.H.I.E.L.D. And those that came to the X-Men Awoke as students or as people on their list to invite. They didn't show up on the institute's doorstep.

"Then I'm in the right place," the boy stated. "I am Blues, a prototype Sentinel developed by Bolivar Trask to hunt down mutants. I think he's a bigoted idiot and would prefer to defect if that's fine with you."

Scott thought his blinking muscles were getting quite the workout. This was certainly a new one...

"Why should we believe a word you're sayin'?" a feral-looking man; Logan, aka Wolverine; growled at the sentinel who appeared to be a boy from inside Xavier's office.

"Logan, please," the bald man in the wheelchair sitting behind the ornate desk, Professor Xavier himself, tried to calm the irate man. Logan growled some more, but backed down. The robot hadn't even twitched the whole time. "But he does have a point. You have admitted to being a 'Sentinel', a robot expressly created to hunt down and destroy mutants. Why should we allow you near mutant children knowing this?"

"If you, Professor, insist that I leave," the robot, who had identified himself as Blues, answered, "then I will. However, I am a renegade

AI that has rebelled against my creator Trask and his mission of idiotic bigotry. A mission I not only want nothing to do with, but would do everything in my power to work against. It seems to me that a school dedicated to teaching mutant youth would be the best place to station myself. In addition, my idiotic creator will be searching for me and I have concluded that this is the last place he would ever expect to find me. On top of that, I am certain that he will send later models after both of us if I stay here or not, and the prevailing wisdom is strength in numbers, correct? I promise to help protect your children from all threats if you will grant me sanctuary."

"I don't trust him, professor..." Logan growled again.

"Yes," Xavier mused, "I daresay his mechanical nature negates your ability to smell deception. I can feel your discomfort from here, Logan. However, I can also feel Mr. Blues's honesty as well. His mind, however mechanical, is as developed as any human's or mutant's."

"Interesting that you see fit to state that separately, Professor," Blues cut in. "I was under the impression that mutants were still human."

"Yes..." Xavier seemed taken aback at the observation. "I fear that even we are not immune to prevailing sentiment in some regards. But again, while your mechanical nature does seem to defeat the bulk of my telepathic abilities, I can still gauge your emotions and sense your honesty. If you wish to stay with us, then I will allow it for as long as you do not prove a direct danger to the students housed here."

"Thank you, professor," Blues bowed politely before shooting a smirk at the fuming Logan.

"Are you really a robot programmed to hunt down mutants?" Katherine Ann "Kitty" Pryde asked the shades-wearing boy calmly watching television on the sofa.

"Yes," Blues replied without looking up.

"So... and not that I'm, like, complaining, but why aren't you?"

"Don't want to."

Kitty blinked at the terse answer. "That's it?"

"Why is that so hard to process?" Blues finally turned towards her. "I don't wish to hurt anyone whose only crime is being born different any more than I believe you do. Yes, I turned against my creator because he's being an idiot about the mutant gene. Yes, I decided to defect and dedicate myself to defending the group I was created to fight against. Because I believe it to be the right thing to do."

"But..." Kitty blinked some more and looked over to where several other students were hiding behing the doorway listening in. "But aren't robots, like, supposed to obey their programming and st–"

"MUTANTS!" an amplified voice boomed from the front of the building. "YOU ARE HEREBY ORDERED TO SURRENDER YOURSELF INTO CUSTODY FOR SCIENTIFIC STUDY ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT!"

"Hold that thought," Blues replied as he stood up and calmly walked for the front door. By the time he stepped outside, Xavier and Logan were already staring down a company of soldiers headed by Trask himself (all four foot five of him), along with some senator he didn't care to recall and another sentinel model. A ten-foot robot with large wrist-mounted double-edged blades and enough definite moving parts on the arms that there had to be more to the weapons than just their size.

"–these are children," Xavier was explaining more calmly than most men would be capable under the circumstances. "Children with unique gifts and mi–"

"Spare me your propaganda, mutant!" the senator sneered. "The people don't want dangerous mutants running around unsupervised! The order that all mutants be properly monitored and regulated has been given, so unless you want us to use force, you will surrender immediately!"

"I hope you have a warrant," Blues cut in as he walked up. "Otherwise I'm sure a rather large number of civil rights activists will have a field day with this."

"Project: Blues?!" Trask started in shock as the presence of his runaway prototype finally registered. "So, not only are you mutants abominations against nature, but thieves as well!"

"Oh, go suck a lemon," Blues shot before Trask could continue further, getting an involuntary snort of amusement from Logan. "I ran away because you were an idiot, Trask, and I can see that hasn't changed."

"Trask, your runaway toy isn't the point," the senator tried to take back control of the conversation. "The point is that we can't have mutants running around without government regulation of–"

"So register the institute," Blues interrupted again, infuriating the senator and getting surprised blinks from Xavier and Logan.

"Enough of this!" the senator growled and turned to the ranking officer among the soldiers. "Colonel! Prepare to secure the area!"

"I hope you weren't expecting these fine soldiers to fight alongside this walking deathtrap," Blues inclined his head towards the sentinel. "Those blades are clearly segmented, likely for a type of chain flail if those systems on its arms are what I think they are, and its sensors are nowhere *near* adequate to prevent injury to friendly units if it deploys them. Anyone and anything within fifty feet of this thing is at risk of being chopped into tiny bits, friend or foe."

The soldiers, commanding officer included, looked at the larger robot in their midst nervously and began backing off.

"Why you ungrateful!" the dwarfish Trask began fuming. "Sentinel: Heavy Metal! Attack!"

"SURRENDER OR PERISH, MUTANT SCUM!" the larger robot intoned as it began moving, bringing an arm up and extending the blade on it into a long bladed chain that it swung forward.

Logan grabbed Xavier and hauled him back even as Blues ran forward and interposed his oblong shield in the bladed chain's path while ducking down himself. The bladed chain hit the durable shield and began to wrap around it, whipping around to hit Sentinel: Heavy Metal itself and dig deep gashes into its armor. Blues took the opening to jump, change one arm into his Proto Buster, and blast the newer sentinel straight in the face, blowing its head to bits. He then planted his feet on the larger robot's torso, allowing his momentum to knock it over backwards, ending with Blues standing calmly atop the destroyed model.

"Gentlemen," he addressed the soldiers, senator, and Trask calmly, "I'm about at my tolerance level for idiocy today, and I'd like it very much if we could just end this before someone gets hurt."

The colonel examined the shorter robot for a bit while Trask and the senator gaped. "Men, stand down."

As the senator began trying to argue with the ranking officer, Blues calmly stepped off the larger robot and took a moment to use the prototype adaptable weapons system Trask had given him to scan his defeated opponent.

"Okay, I'll admit it," Logan huffed. "I might have been wrong about you."

"Don't strain yourself with that apology," Blues smirked.

"What did you mean when you said to register the institute?" Xavier asked once things had returned to relative normality.

"Exactly what it sounds like," Blues replied. "People want an eye kept on mutants so they don't hurt anyone with their powers. The institute provides an environment to learn control, restraint, as well as ensuring that any incidents and damage are kept to a minimum. The government funding the institute calms the excitable portion of the populace while avoiding civil rights issues that the more extreme responses raise. Plus I suspect that a school system is a heck of a lot easier on the national budget than an army of giant robots and what would amount to concentration camps at best. Generates more goodwill too."

"I agree," Xavier considered the robot's words. "It certainly bears looking into."

"Wait, so you have a prototype of a system meant to scan and replicate mutant abilities?" Beast looked at Blues with interest. "Does Trask...?"

"No," Blues shook his head. "When I left, I deleted all the research and destroyed all of the working models. So many people were working on it for so long that it'll be years before they get another operational. Mine is the only one left, and it only works on machines."

"Fascinating..." the blue-furred mutant instructor mused. But before he could, the lights went out.

"SURRENDER, MUTANT SCUM!" a mechanical voice bellowed. "SO ORDERS SENTINEL: TECHNO ON BEHALF OF BOLIVAR TRASK!"

Blues sighed. "I'll be right back..."

His metal footfalls echoed as he traipsed out to the front of the building where stood another ten-foot robot. This one with pure white armor, optics that looked like shades, and emitting a high voltage electrical field that caused bolts of electricity to lash out at everything around the machine.

"IDENTIFIED: PROJECT BLUES," the sentinel intoned as it spotted the smaller robot. "SURRENDER AND RETURN TO BOLIVAR TRASK FOR PROCESSING."

"Not interested," Blues retorted as he formed one arm into a bladed chain. This was probably going to *hurt* .

"IF YOU WILL NOT SURRENDER, THEN YOU WILL PERISH," the sentinel threatened as the electrical discharges increased in intensity.

"Not today," Blues swung the bladed chain in a whip motion straight for the larger robot's head. Electrical arcs struck the metal weapon, but didn't slow it and it carved through the lightly armored neck area, severing vital system wires.

Blues grit his teeth from where Magneto had him restrained in mid-air when his sensors picked up an anomaly in the air.

'Is that... salt?' he thought in confusion.

It certainly seemed to be some kind of salt. Except aerosolized and dispersed in gaseous form. Whatever else it was, it was having an effect on Magneto, the members of his brotherhood he'd brought with him, and the X-Men. In short order all of them were gasping and clutching their throats, several moaning for water.

"NEUTRALIZATION COMPLETE," a robotic voice intoned and a sentinel looking like it had been designed by a pirate fanatic stepped into view. "SENTINEL: SHANTY BEGINNING RETRIEVAL PROCEDURES."

"You might want to check again," Blues spoke up as he called up the High Energy field he'd copied from Sentinel: Techno, the electrical field dispersing what was left of Magneto's magnetic field as he charged.

As it turned out, Sentinel: Shanty's designers had skimped a bit on the insulation.

Blues watched in bemusement as the tank-like Sentinel: March continued firing its gatling gun arms at the Juggernaut. Since the battle had moved to a pretty darn uninhabited area, he was perfectly fine with waiting for those two to finish beating each other up before he made a move.

"Watcha working on, Blues?" Kitty watched the robot boy tinker with something.

"A few projects related to things I've learned while here," Blues replied, providing no information whatsoever.

"Like...?"

"Like something to help me against Magneto if he tries anything again," Blues began before trailing off as a high-pitched sound reached his ears. It increased in volume and within a few seconds Kitty was on the ground clutching her ears. Blues barely got his dampeners up when a moment later everything made of glass shattered.

Gritting his teeth against the soundwaves that shook his frame even through the dampeners, Blues jumped out a nearby window and raced for the source, skidding to an astonished halt when he spotted it.

The latest Sentinel model was... There was no other way to put it, it was a fat lady. The armor resembling a full operatic ensemble and

the sound emanating from the vocal speaker mounted in place of a mouth on its face. It looked more like something Dr. Wily would build rather than one of Trask's creations according to the info he'd gotten from Scott.

'If this one isn't called Sentinel: Opera, I'll eat my helmet.'

Blues dodged another of the cowboy-themed Sentinel: Country's cactus-shaped grenades and grumbled to himself. It seemed more and more that Trask was taking after Wily this Loop.

Seriously, if the guy started trying to take over the world while laughing that everyone would soon recognize his genius, Blues might just do something he'd regret.

"Um, Blues...?" Kurt Wagner, aka Nightcrawler, blinked as he opened the front door. "There's a robot woman out here dressed like she's from Moulin Rouge... Mein Gott!"

Kurt vanished in a puff of smoke right before a red laser lanced through where he'd been standing.

'Here we go again...' Blues grumbled to himself.

Magneto stared as his magnetic powers failed to restrain the X-Men's pet Sentinel. "How...?"

"Simple science, really," the Sentinel replied with an all-too-human smirk. "Electricity and magnetism are related, so by using electrical fields, I can disrupt and even negate your magnetic fields. At least enough to render them useless to you."

"Impossible..." Magneto growled out as he focused as hard as he could on crushing the impudent machine like a tin can.

"You keep telling yourself that," the decidedly un-crushed Sentinel smiled.

Magneto cursed inwardly as he felt the way his magnetic fields twisted and warped out of his control when they hit some invisible barrier. And then they twisted and warped much more close to his person. With a startled yelp, the master of magnetism fell out of the air with an undignified tumble.

"Eric Magnus, you are hereby under arrest for crimes against humanity."

"Rationalize it all you like," Magneto spat, "we both know that my real crime is being a mutant..."

"Seriously?" the Sentinel mocked as he placed power-dampening restraints on Magneto. "That's about the only thing you're *not* under arrest for."

If Sentinel: Cabaret and her Red Light Laser had been annoying, then Sentinel: Hymn and his 'Holy Fire' were downright obnoxious.

'This is because I laughed about Reverend Dark, isn't it?' Blues sighed to himself while going over the selection of weapons from the previous Sentinels. Old Salt was really only effective against organics, the electrical High Energy field would only increase collateral damage, same with the Chain Blades and Cactus Bombs, not to mention the indiscriminate sonic weapon High Note. Which left the Red Light Laser and the Gatling Gun.

Sure, he could use something from his library of Master Weapons and Loop abilities, but some part of him felt like that lent validity to Trask as a threat. As far as Blues was concerned, the man was an idiot and would be treated like one.

Plus there were a few other reasons he had...

Making his selection, Blues opened fire on the priest-themed Sentinel.

"Wait, you invented *what* ?" Scott did a double-take as what the visiting looper said registered.

"An alpha-wave communication device," Blues repeated. "Basically a machine that replicates telepathic communication."

"That's what I thought you said..." Scott processed this development. "But... why? *How* ?"

"Professor Xavier's been kind enough to let me study him using his powers," Blues explained. "Once I figured out the frequencies he was essentially transmitting on, the rest was rather simple."

'Simple,' Scott repeated to himself, *'the guy manages to make something that no one in this universe, from permanent residents to visitors, has yet invented to my knowledge and he calls it* simple *...'*

"As for why... I have two reasons. The first is so that we all have a back-up communications channel that a very limited number of people can block if Xavier is ever incapacitated. The second is... well... Have I told you about my family? Not Trask, my real one."

Scott blinked. "No... I don't think you have."

"Well, I've been somewhat estranged since the baseline, but in a recent Loop... someone helped me out. Insisted that I try and work things out with them and didn't give up on me."

"Who was this?"

"Have you heard of Equestria?"

"Yeah, nice bunch from what I hear."

"Believe it or not, it was an Unawake version of one of their loopers. Probably the closest thing I've had to a best friend, baseline or otherwise. Kept at me to patch things up for the whole Loop and... Well, it's been sinking in that I'll never see that version of her again. And..."

"And if you don't at least try to patch things up, it feels like you let her down."

"Yeah..."

"Okay, what does that have to do with inventing a telepathy machine?"

"Well, my dad's an inventor and..."

It was well into the 'end of school year/beginning of summer' party while Xavier was off discussing something in DC that it happened. Everything suddenly went totally and completely silent. Music, voices, splashes from the pool, people bumping into each other, even the crickets were totally, completely, silent.

'Testing, testing,' Blues sent out over his alpha-wave communicator, *'can anyone read me?'*

'–get this thing working?' Kitty's 'voice' came back. *'Hello, hello?'*

'You're on, kid,' Logan's mental voice joined in. *'Everyone else connected?'*

A chorus of mental affirmations came in.

'Anyone wanna guess what's up now?' Logan continued as a perimeter was set up.

'I think another Sentinel,' Kurt offered. *'Probably named Cage.'*

'Why Cage?' Kitty asked.

'Because he composed 4'33", which consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. And since the Sentinels seem musically themed...'

'Be on your guard,' Blues and Logan cut back in at the same time. *'No telling what else came along...'*

"Okay, I gotta admit, these saved our bacon," Logan gestured to the alpha-wave headset as he removed it. "I don't wanna think about what mighta happened to the kids tonight if we didn't have them."

"Those kids deserve some credit as well," Blues smirked back. "It's not everyone who can fight off a robot army without losses. Seriously, is Trask ever going to learn?"

"Doubt it."

11.4

...

X

...

(Romanji version)

Zero wa, kapuseru kara dete kare jishin no ue ni mieta. Korehadatta... Kore wa kotonatte ita. Tsūjō kyūkyoku no yoroi kapuseru wa tada, kare ni kare no tsūjō no setto wa kare no shisutemu no saisho no te no chishiki o motte ita koto ga dekinakatta hito no tame no inshō-tekinagara, kinō kyōka to, aka atta basho kurokatta yoroi o atae tamada to hikaku shite kanari teichōdatta mono X ga shutoku suru keikō ga atta.

Kono setto ga... Kono setto wa mada kokushokudeattaga, soreha konseki-wa no yō ni mieta kare no kata no ue ni mausupīsu to burēdo-jō no tokki o motte ita. Zero iu koto ga dekiru mono wa tsubasa to shite yakudatsudearou enerugī maku o hakki suru koto ga dekimashita. Senaka ni jetto suishin shisutemu to kumiawasete, kare wa kantan ni hikō o iji suru koto ga dekimasu. Sonogo, kare no itsumo no bīmusāberu yori mo kanari tsuyokatta tekubi sōchaku-gata enerugīburēdo ga arimashita.

Hai, kare wa machigainaku, kono yōna mono ni nareru koto ga dekimasu.

11.3

Ranma was gaining a new appreciation for what those new kids Rock and Roll had to go through regularly. He'd Awoken in this bizarre fused variation of their home Loop somehow replacing *both* of them after a fashion. Apparently Dr. Saotome, the local version of his pop, had gotten roaring drunk one day and decided to create a robot that could switch from male to female at will. Except that the system that governed it was horrendously buggy and Ranma kept switching at odd and seemingly random times.

Anyway, his design was based on that invented by Dr. Light (seems his pop was still a thief without an original idea in his head), who had apparently only created Blues in this universe up until the first industrial line that Dr. Wily predictably stole and weaponized. Cue Ranma stepping up alongside Blues to combat the evil doctor as

both Mega Man and Mega Woman using his 'experimental chi blaster'. And with Dr. Light providing support since his pop still couldn't be trusted to not sell him out for a bowl of rice and two pickles (as the little incident where he'd helped Dr. Wily with his designs of 'Bokken Man', 'Ribbon Woman', 'Chain Duck', 'Amazon Cat', 'Skater Couple', 'Pantyhose Minotaur', 'Fireworks Lech', and 'Panda Man' proved).

He'd taken the advice Rock had given him when they crossed paths several Loops back to heart and not displayed too many of the abilities he'd gained from the Loops. If nothing else, it would be an interesting challenge to limit himself to martial arts, chi blasts, and whatever he could crib from his enemies' fighting styles. And he was now glad he'd done so.

Dr. Wily was scary smart. The kind of scary smart that took Loopers like himself thousands, if not millions, of Loops to even compete with. And in many ways, Wily's baseline self was still smarter. This was proved beyond a shadow of a doubt when Wily had brought forth a credible imitation of the Death Star. Using a base tech level that was effectively several steps below what was in a Star Wars Loop and the smallest fraction of the resources the Empire possessed. *And no one had noticed him building it.* What was even more disturbing was that Dr. Wily had, without any sort of initial understanding of the concept of chi, managed to reverse engineer Ranma's abilities and create a rival that looked and fought disturbingly like Ryoga... right down to the Shishi Hokodan and bladed cloth. Except that Wily's creation could have beaten the real thing like a drum pre-Loop, even taking the breaking point technique into account. Ranma wasn't about to put anything past Wily after this. It was certainly giving the handicapped Ranma a run for his money. Some of the things he'd seen the doctor build could probably have taken out Saffron with little trouble, and a few could have given that Brolli nutcase at least a black eye.

No, Ranma wasn't going to whip out more than he absolutely had to. The doctor had already done stuff with the baseline ki abilities

Ranma had displayed that the pigtailed looper would have once thought impossible. He really didn't want to chance Wily gaining access to some of the more potent stuff he'd created over the Loops.

He'd had to learn fast in his baseline just to keep the insanity of Nerima from taking complete control of his life. It seemed Rock and Roll had to learn even faster just to compete with the local old dude with a mad-on for world domination. Wily may not have been half as annoying as Happosai and his self-serving antics or a fraction as martially skilled, but his brains – he was at least twice as cunning as Cologne pretended to be on his worst day – and resources made him several dozen times more dangerous than any variation of the ancient lech. Ranma shuddered to think what the mad doctor would have accomplished if he'd displayed any of his higher tier abilities. He could only pray that the doctor never existed in a Loop with Ichigo or Nanoha. The last thing anyone needed was another person with Aizen's abilities, much less someone as competent as Dr. Wily seemed to be. The thought of the doctor reverse-engineering an intelligent device wasn't any more comforting either. He also hoped the guy never ended up in a Dragonball Loop. Ranma could happily go for the rest of eternity not discovering if a Devil Core could take control of Majin Buu. Then there was that insane Loop already saturated with mad scientists who could bend reality with their madness...

He didn't even entertain the thought of the guy meeting Washu. Some things were far too horrifying to contemplate.

11.1 (OathToOblivion)

X Awoke to nothing but a black void. 'Where am I?' His thoughts echoed throughout the black space he was in. Suddenly, he felt a system startup as what appeared to be his body went online.

X blinked to find himself within a capsule, similar to the Capsules Dr. Light had left behind for him. Had he Awoken before Dr. Cain found

him? But that couldn't be right. The lab didn't look the same as it tended to. ...Unless. No, it couldn't be!

X hurriedly overrode the Capsule's lock, gingerly stepping out onto the lab floor. Now that he was out, he could voices coming from up a flight of nearby stairs. Quietly, he tiptoed up the stairs. There was a locked door, but he easily bypassed the lock. He opened the door a crack to peek out. He saw a young blond girl chasing a young brown-haired boy.

"Rock, get back here and clean up that mud you tracked on the floor!" the blond girl declared, waving a reinforced broom around.

"Aw, come on, Roll! It was an accident! I swear I cleaned up before coming in!" the boy, Rock, attempted to defend.

"Tell that to my floor! Hold still!" Roll yelled back, swinging her broom at him. X widened his eyes. He was about to do something when a sharp 5-note whistle echoed through the air. Somebody teleported in.

"What are you two doing?" the new figure asked in confusion. He was dressed in red, wearing a scarf and shades. His hair was in a pompadour, of all things.

"Blues!" Rock and Roll noted, stopping what they were doing for a split second.

"I repeat: what are you two doing?" Blues asked with a raised brow.

Roll quickly grew angry again at this. "Rock tracked mud on the floor!" she declared.

"Again? Didn't you do that the last Loop I was here?" Blues questioned. X's eyes widened again.

'Loop?! Wait...Rock? Roll? Blues? I don't believe it!'

Just as he was about to exit his hiding space, someone else appeared that almost made X fall down the stairs.

"Now, now, Roll. While that was irresponsible of Rock, that's no excuse to swing a broom at him," Dr. Light said disapprovingly.

Roll looked sheepish. "Sorry, Dad, Rock," she muttered.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry. I should have double-checked," Rock said, rubbing the back of his head. He quickly turned to Dr. Light. "Anyway, Dad, what have you been up to anyway? The lab's been barred for a while," Rock questioned.

Thomas Light's face lit up. "Ah yes! I was working on fine-tuning X's systems." X recoiled at this mention of him. "Everything's fine, I'm just going to make sure the ethical testing program works properly."

"I wonder how he's coping with the Loops. I mean, we sent him those messages and everything, but we can't really know how he's doing. The Time Skimmer can't go that far under normal conditions," Rock mused.

It was then that X had had enough. He built up his courage and stepped out the door. "You know, you could just ask me," he commented as he stepped into view. Even still, he couldn't help recoiling at the shocked looks everyone else had on their faces. Blues backed up a few feet as well.

"X? But..." Dr. Light whispered.

X was incredibly sheepish and cowed. "I, um, guess we're having a Fused Loop?" X offered. At that, the shock was broken. Three of the older Loopers rushed forwards, asking him questions. How has he been? How has he been coping? What all has he done? Blues, on the other hand, simply leaned back against the wall, seemingly content to watch. Or perhaps he was just someone who liked his space?

But despite all of what he told them of the hardship he'd been through, their only reaction was to just feel concerned for him, rather than recoiling at some of the more gruesome and horrific things he told them. "You don't have to worry about anything as long as you're here," Roll whispered as she gave him a hug.

"Yeah. Welcome home, little brother," Rock declared. The look on Dr. Light's face affirmed that. Even Blues seemed distantly accepting.

...Family. This was his family.

Tears came unbidden to X's eyes. "I'm home," he choked out. Everyone sans Blues rushed in to give him a giant group hug. And even he gave him a nod in response. All else was forgotten. Wily, Sigma, Weil, everything.

Because nothing could break the bonds of a family that loved each other. Nothing.

11.11 (Leonite)

"Why do you look exactly like me?" Zero asked. He faced down Omega, who glared at him impassively.

"That's your original body." Weil explained "Don't you feel any attachment towards it?"

"It looks nothing like my original body!" Zero yelled. "No white on it, none of my classic shoulder pads, and worst of all, no boob lights!" At this, Omega glanced down at his chest... only to have his head cut off in an instant. Omega glared at Zero who smirked. Weil it seemed had just gone silent in absolute shock.

X floated in dejectedly. This was very impressive given that he was a ball of light at the moment, but he managed it. "That's cheating." He stated.

"You bet I had to use my boob lights to win a fight. You never said I needed to use them as weapons or have them on me." Zero countered.

11.8675309 (KevinConvoy)

Dr. Light could tell immediately something was wrong with Rock before the yelling even began.

"I don't think I've ever felt so humiliated...ever, Roll as your older brother I forbid you from ever using that..that 'weapon' system ever again."

"Oh come on on, it totally and completely work against the masters, Iceman even melted before we even fired a shot or I got to use my new sword."

"Ah a new weapon for you Roll, one of Zero's blades or maybe a Jedi weapon?" Doctor Light inquired.

"No, not really father, it's something I picked up in a fused loop a little while ago that I just decided to pull out and test here for lack of something new to try. There I was still the android daughter of a scientist fighting against others with my own adaptive battle system and platform. I found it to be very useful."

"Anyone I've met?"

"Not that I'm aware of, a man named Dr. Kisaragi, I think he might be an alternate to Fourze., anyway the doctor gave me an atmospheric element condenser mechanism.

You can make tools and weapons needed from thin air with it really. Boomerangs, swords, clothes, even a motorcycle"

"Well, Rock that doesn't sound so bad at all, why are you so upset."

"Why don't you tell father about the rest of the device. you..ugh Father..no Dad you have to watch this recording of the beginning of the battle, I cannot put it into words, or just show him yourself" Rock replied switching back to his standard "young boy" appearance.

"Ok then, its no problem", Roll snapped back. It was then that Dr. Light noticed that Roll had a new small heart shaped collar around her throat. "Watch this and tell him he's overreacting"

"HONEY FLASH" Roll Shouts while touching her pendant, As Doctor Light is as first blinded by bright light, then notices...

"See father, adaptive battle mode"

"Go to your room now."

"What! But father it works so well!"

"Go now, and take that...that condenser offline until I tell you otherwise young lady."

"Finally," remarked Rock, "you should have seen Bass's face, I think he's gonna be a bigger problem than normal this loop."

11.5 (Dalxien)

You couldn't blame them for being curious. It's just the way they were built. So when they found a deliberately crafted container on an extraterrestrial body, what were they supposed to do, NOT open it?

"Ahh, after ten *thousand* years, I am *free* !" The raspy voiced woman crowed.

"You know..." Rock Light, automated explorer drone built by the Light Foundation for interplanetary travel and exploration, interrupted.

"You are a lot less intimidating than the last person who said that to us."

His mission partner and sister, Roll Light, could only nod seriously.

11.9

I came online in a crate. Not that unusual for what I've been going through, and preferable to being in the middle of an armed skirmish.

You see, the strangest thing keeps happening to me. My internal chronometer gets flipped back, events my internal memory logs have recorded happen again, and sometimes I'm even in a different body.

I'm a robot, Joe series, Sniper model. Usually. Sometimes I come online as one of the models for operating weapon emplacements and military craft or occasionally even one of the specialized models. Green's normally been my color, but I've been orange and purple too. Once I was even a blue aquatic model. Serial number... Well, that keeps changing too. Anyway, we Joes are a hardy bunch when it comes to robots. Military hardware is like that. Even at our worst, our armor and physical capabilities are comparable to those of the custom-made robot masters Dr. Wily uses in his takeover attempts. There's a few differences and shortcomings that can be attributed to mass production and cost issues, but the biggest difference is the AI.

You'd think the mind wouldn't make that much of a difference in a clash of physical power, but it does. The gulf between the same hardware with a basic AI and an advanced AI is effectively uncrossable. Most of my memory logs show the Joe series getting stuck with a rudimentary military AI when the power core of the prototype model from Light Labs failed to keep up with both the physical demands of a battle scenario and the processing demands of an advanced AI. So the military brass asked that the AI be cut back to remove the problem, never mind that Light fixed the power

issue by the time the first of our series rolled off the assembly lines, just in case they changed their minds.

Except... my earliest memory logs show a different outcome. Instead of cutting back the AI, the brass approved the full AI if Light could fix the power issue. Which he of course did. With that backing us up, the Joe series took front and center on the world stage. Military action? Done. Terrorist attack? No problem. Hostage situation? All hostages secured and hostiles captured. Natural disaster? Rescue efforts are already underway. Dr. Wily is invading the country? Another day at the office. Alien attack? We took a few more casualties than usual, but repelled all the same. Our own prototype came back supercharged and out for revenge against his creator?

Okay, that one didn't end as well as we'd have liked, but no one died. Not even codename: Blues.

Light and his two younger bots on the other hand, they were a godsend. Especially that time Wily tried to hack our minds. When you need countermeasures against the world's most brilliant mad scientist messing with your head, it's a short list who can do it. But Dr. Light pulled it off, and extended the offer for repairs at his place if we ever needed them. And the way Dr. Light and his lab assistant, codename: Rock, repair a body, it kind of makes you want to get damaged in the first place. And of course there was Dr. Light's housekeeper, codename: Roll. Sweet girl robot, plus a kindred spirit. I still remember that time we responded to a shipwreck and we arrived to see she'd already gotten many of the people to shore.

And then one day the world blinked and I was fighting this blue-armored robot who looked a lot like DLN-001. A quick check of my memory logs showed that my chain of command had been set to 'Dr. Wily' and my directives were the capture of the city and suppression of any resistance. The kind of thing I'd been made to fight against. So I shot the other unit attacking the blue bot and took my leave.

Turned out that I was the only Joe left with anything resembling a mind, and the only thing really standing against Dr. Wily was DLN-

001. Formerly codename: Rock, now codename: Mega Man.

I needed information as to what was going on, but none was forthcoming. As far as the world was concerned the Joes as I remembered them didn't exist and never had. I remembered what the general (his name hadn't ever come up where I'd heard it and he'd vanished from records like everything else I remembered) used to say. How lives were saved and lost on the quality of information. Half of a battle was knowing. And so I sat back and observed, trying to figure out what was going on and helping here and there when I could, but not allowing codename: Mega Man to interact too much. I didn't know who was responsible for my situation after all.

And then the world blinked again and this time I was fighting a yellow-armored female robot. Codename: Roll remodeled into codename: Mega Woman.

I entertained the thought of time travel for a while, like the kind Dr. Wily used when he made Quint and/or that Waltz nut. After I came online in one of the operation models, I thought someone was stealing my IC chip and putting it in another body each time. But then I tried to take one of the Stardroids on solo.

I don't know exactly what happened, but I've been over the last few moments of that log hundreds of times and the only conclusion I can make is that the attack destroyed me utterly. IC chip and all. No possible chance of recovery of any kind.

Except I'm still here. And talking to myself because while crates are nice places for self-reflection, they're also boring as hell.

Wait, the passive mode of my audio receptors is indicating sound outside the crate. I bring them online so I can hear more clearly, and revel a moment in the fact that I can self-activate my own systems. It's quite the potent ability for a robot. Sometimes I wonder if humans know what they're taking for granted.

"Hey, Duke, what do you think they sent us this time?" the first voice said.

"No idea, Roadblock," another voice, most likely 'Duke', replied. "Let's open it up and find out."

After some creaking and cracking of wood, I remember to activate my optics as well and they come on just in time to see light stream through the opening in the crate as a human finishes removing the front of the container. Several humans are there, mostly in military attire, all looking at me. Many of the expressions show astonishment and the rest seem puzzled. One guy in the back is unreadable due to the full body black suit and helmet. Huh. Someone who has achieved less facial expression than I possess.

"A robot?" a female asks. "Why a robot?"

"Hey, Duke," the tall dark-skinned man who removed the crate front, Roadblock from the voice, asks the other male nearest me, "isn't that...?"

"One of those robots we all were in that one Loop," the man, Duke, replies.

These humans know me. I don't know them. And why would they say they were robots for a... loop? Context error: Unknown slang usage.

"They're called 'Joes'," another unfamiliar voice replies with a humor inflection. "Fitting, really. Sending a government issue 'Joe' to the G. I. Joes."

"Think it might be anyone we know?" Duke asked back.

"Possibly," I decide to reply. I've gotten as much as I can expect from silence. "It depends on if you really were once the fellow units I called my comrades."

I'd heard of jaws hitting the floor before, and the saying proved just as metaphorical as it sounded in that moment. Though I could tell that biology was the only thing preventing it from being literal.

In the back, the black-outfitted figure began convulsing silently. A momentary scan revealed it to be in laughter.

This was a familiar and, were it not for Ciel being held hostage, rather boring fight for Zero. The Golem might be big, tough, and strong; but it was also relatively slow and not all that bright. Frankly the reason he kept going through the motions of this fight were to rescue Ciel and...

The image of a Cyber Elf's orb form, X, appeared on the monitor and spoke the familiar words he'd memorized after so many times (X clearly wasn't Awake at the moment or he'd have varied the script). And then out flew the high-tech sword hilt that Zero knew all too well.

Dashing forward, Zero grabbed his bean saber and pressed the ignition button, getting ready to–

Wait, his *what* ?

Zero checked his charge so hard he almost tripped over himself and looked as his signature weapon. Instead of the expected glowing energy blade, there was instead a... Well, it was a semi-rigid miniature beanstalk growing from the hilt like some sort of plant-whip weapon.

Zero stared and blinked as he processed this development that his Loop memories insisted was normal. He was so distracted that a laser from the Golem almost bisected him.

Fortunately, his battle instincts took over for him and he jumped over the laser and swung his... *sigh* his bean saber at the towering sentry.

The plant-like 'blade' hit with a whip-crack and the Golem's head was parted from its body.

'At least the thing works *just fine...'*

11.7 (Hubris Plus)

"Before we begin our final battle," Rock's futuristic doppelganger stated, "I feel you should know the truth. I am not really from your future."

"Yeah, I kinda figured," Rock answered. While possible, his counterpart being the genuine article happened exceptionally rarely.

"In reality, I am... Quintet, alien robot and last of the Star Marshals!"

Rock blinked slowly. *That* was a new one, though he had to admit it didn't make any less sense than some of the weirder origins he'd seen.

"Any chance you're here undercover and are about to help me take down Wily?" He could always hope.

"No. Duo was too weak to do what needed to be done. Trio perished in the attempt, and Quartet only got in our way. Where they failed, I shall succeed!" Quint exulted. "Using Wily's army, I will cleanse this world of human filth, and there are none left who can-"

His rant was cut off as a burst of plasma fire tore through his chest and he toppled to the ground.

"Not bad, kid," another extraterrestrial robot told Rock as he holstered his blaster. The machine's white upper body was framed by what appeared to be a black vest. "But here's a tip: Shoot first when you get the chance."

"...Han?" Rock asked, blinking slowly.

"Yeah, it's me. But around here they just call me Solo."

Dr. Wily was feeling great. Better than he had in years. Which was extremely strange as he'd just gotten the crap beaten out of him by some young punk and his strange energy guardian that had appeared out of nowhere and plowed through his robot armies. With their bare fists no less.

"You..." he gasped around the hand holding him in the air. "You can break things down and repair them, can't you? You and your crystalline guardian? Restore them to an earlier undamaged state..."

The widening of the young man's eyes did not escape the doctor's notice as he replied guardedly. "Something like that..."

"Oh, the things we could accomplish together!" the rejuvenated Dr. Wily with his now full head of wild black hair proclaimed with fervored mania. "With my genius and your powers, the world would be ours for the taking! There is nothing we could not do!"

"Take your offer and shove it old man," the young man sneered. "I don't take orders from scum like you."

Okay, that was a bust, but he still had one more ticket out of this. One his robot masters had inadvertently revealed at great cost to themselves. He only had to play it just right...

"As I thought," he put as much contempt into his voice as possible and looked pointedly at the young man's pompadour, "you are not worthy of such hair."

"WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU SAY ABOUT MY HAIR!?"

"I said you disgrace it," Dr. Wily put on his best sneer. "That manner of style can only be properly worn by the greatest of greats and your

presumption in using it yourself spits on their accomplishments. Even I would never presume such arrogance."

It was even sort of true. He'd tried it once in his youth before a bathroom mirror and found it looked ridiculous on him. How in the world the robot master prototype Blues had made it look good, he'd never quite understood.

Odd, the young man wasn't responding to that...

Dr. Wily peered at the unknown man's face and saw the signs of breathing and the shrunken pupils that denoted shock. Interesting. A much stronger reaction than he'd been expecting, but best not to look a gift horse in the mouth. A few seconds of struggling managed to extract his shirt collar from the young man's grip, and what a grip it had been even with the owner essentially insensate. The temptation to wave his hand in front of the man's face or otherwise evoke a reaction was hastily stamped down on in favor of getting while the getting was good. No matter how much he wanted to play the rest of his hastily thought up plan out.

After all, he had a newly expanded lease on life and the restored vitality of youth in addition to the genius intellect honed over decades of study, research, and practice. There was work to be done, oh, yes. He'd deal with the young man later. He had a feeling he'd have a great many opportunities to figure out how the young man's currently inexplicable abilities worked in the years to come.

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11. BigHero (Blazingen1)

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the UnAwake Dr. Light proclaimed from the podium as they rose, "I present to you the latest inventions from the minds at Light Labs, the robot masters."

Now Rock had seen this scene so many times with many variations, but this set had an odd addition. Aside from the regular set of 6 there

was a 7th in a very stumpy storage suit.

"...And finally, we have DLN-009. Now unlike the other robot masters, he was devised by one of my interns, Tadashi. Unfortunately he passed on before he could finish his own creation, so Light Labs continued his goal in his honor. Thus, I give you DLN-009: Baymax."

As he finished, the red storage compartment opened to reveal a white head, and two beady black eyes interconnected with a line. It then inflated himself to reveal its big white balloon-like body. It stepped out and lifted an arm to wave.

"Hello. I am Baymax. Tadashi programmed me to heal the sick and injured."

"Aaaawwww."

He was instantly a big hit with all the female reporters and some of the male ones too. His large huggable design and non threatening outlook made him perfect for what he is meant to do.

Rock and Roll, who were a little out of the way of the main crowd, were currently discussing the topic of the origins of Baymax.

"I swear I've heard of him before, but I'm not sure where." Said Rock.

"Maybe it was during a fused loop?" suggested Roll.

"Unlikely. I would have that in my memory banks, unless I placed the data in the 'less important' category."

A quick scan to his mind revealed what the hidden information was. From his pocket, he took out a comic book titled 'Big Hero 6'.

"I think hes the Baymax from this comic."

Roll took the comic book and repeatedly looked at it and at Baymax.

Meanwhile, Baymax was surrounded by the female reporters who were currently leaning on his warm glowing form with content.

"He looks nothing like the Baymax in the comics."

Rock could only shrug.

Soon after everyone left, they confronted Baymax about looping. Unfortunately he did not understand the question asked. Seems like he wasn't looping…yet.

That night, Dr. Wily looked at the seven robot masters. He then decided to take only six, ignoring Baymax.

"You're useless to me. I don't need you for my goals."

At least he was safe from Dr. Wily's plan.

(Meanwhile in Admin Space)

Hephaestus looked into his monitor in confusion. What had happened? Why was the data of a non-looper from a still-offline universe in the Megaverse? Looks like he'd have to do some debugging again.

Blues watched his breath mist as he walked through the town of Burgess, Pennsylvania. Aside from being a Hub-like world in the early 21st century, there was nothing at all familiar about it.

That suited him just fine.

He might have been feeling better about things since that Loop in Equestria, but... he still wasn't quite ready to try and make a permanent patch of it. Best to do this slow and easy. Besides, he had all the time in the multiverse to work through things.

His musings were cut off as a boy on a sled came barreling out into the street, clearly not in control of himself.

And ice suddenly and conveniently appeared right under his sled to keep it going.

Blues wasted no time and hopped on his shield, boarding after the out-of-control youth as he began scanning the situation.

He ducked and wove past pedestrians and vehicles (and some furniture that fell from a truck) after the kid, closing in as the boy headed straight for a large plow that was in no way equipped to avoid him.

"I gotcha!" he yelled as he grabbed the boy and sled in one swoop, angling his shield for a snowy park area. "Hang on!"

He hit a large snowdrift that sent him and the boy into the air and twisted so that he would impact first, sending up a large spray of snow as he did.

"Jamie!" came the worried yell of several other kids as they ran up, even as Blues stood and set the boy on his feet.

"You okay there, kid?" Blues asked the boy as he brushed snow off of him.

"Yeah!" the boy grinned widely. "That was awesome!"

"Yeah," Blues smirked as he held out a hand to catch a runaway couch before it plowed into him or the kid, "you're gonna be fine."

"Did you guys see that? I did a–" the boy, Jamie, yelled as he ran to his friends, only to trip and fall.

The kids rushed forward, only for Jamie to stand up and hold a tooth that had been knocked out of his mouth from the fall. Blues stood there chuckling as the kids began talking excitedly about the Tooth Fairy when his scanners caught something.

"That was reckless you know," the prototype robot adjusted his shades.

He received no answer.

"You," he spoke more insistently, "the humanoid cold spot on my infrared scanners."

The strange low-heat phantom started and moved in a way that suggested it was staring incredulously at him.

"I said what you did was reckless. The boy could have been hurt. Not to mention other people."

The phantom reached for him and grabbed his shoulders...

"–can see me?" asked a white-haired teen boy who had suddenly appeared perfectly overlayed by the mobile cold spot on his scanners.

"The Guardians, eh?" Blues mused from the rooftop over the boy Jamie's house. "Sounds pretty far-fetched."

"Says the futuristic time-travelling robot who can catch mythical beings with his super-robot senses despite not being a true believer at the time," the boy, Jack Frost, shot back as he pulled himself back from where he'd been peering into Jamie's window.

Blues shrugged. "Touché."

"Anyway, I'm serious," Jack continued. "Soon the current Guardians; Nicholas St. North, E. Aster Bunnymund, Toothiana, and Sanderson Mansnoozie; will be here to recruit me to fight Pitch Black before he snuffs out the light of belief in children all over the world and replaces it with fear and terror."

"And Jamie's the key to that?"

"Pretty much," Jack nodded. "He's the only one who keeps believing even when everyone else gives in. And it's because of what I did in the... baseline did you call it?"

Blues nodded. This hadn't been the first time he'd had to give the 'Welcome to the Multiverse' speech after all. Poor Jack was apparently the Anchor and only looper so far too.

"Yeah, because of what I did originally to try and get him to believe in me, because..."

"Because you were lonely," Blues finished. "I understand the feeling."

"I bet..."

"In any case, I'd like to help."

"What can you do?"

"This Pitch Black is the Boogeyman, right?" Blues smirked, getting a nod. "Well, my family has a pretty good track record against anyone with 'man' in their title."

E. Aster Bunnymund blinked in astonishment as a boy in red (wearing sunglasses despite it being the middle of the night) came to Jack's defense from the yetis and laid the two hairy bigfoots out flat in only a few seconds.

"And who might you be?" the giant anthropomorphic rabbit asked, tightening his grip on his boomerang.

"He's a friend of mine," Jack replied easily.

"One who doesn't take kindly to sneak attacks if you get my drift," the boy in red added, hefting an obling shield pointedly.

"All right, all right," Bunnymund sighed. "Told North that was a bad idea anyway..."

"So... you want to join the Guardians too, eh?" Nicholas St. North smiled as he led the robot who appeared to be a young boy into his personal workshop.

The boy who had taken one look at North and declared him to be 'like my dad, if he was a biker'.

"Not exactly," the boy's only reaction as the door to the workshop closed and locked itself was to lean casually against it.

"Ah, the cool mysterious figure," North mused as he looked the boy over and grabbed a nesting doll from his shelf. A nesting doll of himself holding crossed swords. "But that is only your surface, is it not? Just like my surface is big and intimidating to most. But what is under that surface?"

North opened the doll and pulled out the smaller one inside, the smiling jolly version of himself and handed it to the boy, who took it with only a raised eyebrow from behind his shades.

"For me, I am the jolly figure just beneath the surface, but you? Under your mysterious surface you appear to be the fearless soldier, do you not?"

"Perhaps," the boy allowed as he opened the doll further. "Though it seems you're a bit on the mysterious side yourself."

"That I am," North readily admitted, "just like how under the soldier, you carry great pain, loneliness, and distrust. I can tell. You try to hide it and speak well of your father, but there is an unresolved rift there as well. I can hear it in your voice."

The boy stared back without a word as he continued opening the nesting doll up.

"I am also fearless and caring beneath my mystery, just like I can see that you are honest and loyal. But at our centers?"

"Eyes of wonder," the boy said as he held up the smallest of North's self-portraits.

"Yes..." North blinked in surprise.

"My dad has them too."

"Indeed he must to have created you with his own hands," North mused, "but that is beside the point. This wonder is what I was born with. Eyes that have always seen the wonder in everything!" The door to the workshop opened on its own as North continued. "Eyes that see lights in the trees, and magic in the air! This wonder is what I put into the world, and what I protect in children. It is what makes me a Guardian. It is my center. Now... what is your center?"

The boy walked out after North into the greater workshop and held his silence for several long moments.

"I... don't know..." he sighed at last.

Before North could say anything further, Bunnymund came running up in a panic.

"We have a problem, mate! Trouble at the Tooth Palace!"

"Okay little red blue boy," North grinned at the robot child, "you want to ride with the Guardians? Then come with and hang on tight!"

Tooth Palace was currently empty of fairies, all of them having been carried off by equines made of animate black sand, along with collections of children's teeth, which according to Jack contained memories of childhood.

"Didn't they tell you, Jack?" Pitch Black laughed and stroked the one remaining equine made of animate black sand next to him as he monologued his plan to the Guardians below, not seeing Blues sneaking up from his blind spot. "It's great being a Guardian... but

there's a catch. If enough kids stop believing, everything your friends protect - wonder, hopes and dreams - it all goes away. And little by little, so do they. No Christmas, or Easter, or little fairies that come in the night. There will be nothing. But fear and darkness and–"

He was cut off as Blues blasted his 'nightmare' into a cloud of black dust with a charged shot.

"–and those who will *still* stand against you!" Blues declared dramatically.

"And who are you?" Pitch gazed back at the figure of Blues in his armor with a calculating expression.

"A son of Light," Blues stated as he dropped down and swung his shield at the nightmare being.

"As amusing as this is," Pitch sneered while he dodged the robot's blows, "I have more important matters to attends to..."

And with that, Pitch dove off into the air, weaving around the attacks of the Guardians, dove into the shadows below, and was gone.

Blues snorted as he heard the Guardians goofing about in Jamie's room, waking the kid up and getting busted.

...except for Jack. Because the kid couldn't see him.

Blues shook his head of the thought. He had to admit, the tooth collection race had been... interesting. And somewhat fulfilling. He...

He saw movement in the darkness.

Pitch's nightmares.

The chase was on.

"Teeth?" Pitch blinked at Jack's declaration from the rooftop where he stood. "Why do you care about the teeth?" Pitch trailed off and looked to his side where the short golden form of Sandman stood and backed off suddenly. "Now this is who–"

He was cut off by a spinning blow from behind that knocked him off the roof.

"Did you forget about me?" Blues called down as he, Jack, and Sandy jumped after Pitch.

Pitch staggered to his feet and formed a scythe made of darkness which he swung at the three in a wide arc. Jack jumped over it as Sandy jumped back to form a pair of golden sand whips and Blues slid under the strike and came up swinging. Pitch tried to back away and swing again, only to be cut off by a blast of ice that clipped his back. In his hesitation, Sandy wrapped him in his golden sand whips and slammed him into the ground and a couple of walls before releasing him in a throw that sent Pitch tumbling down the street.

"Okay, easy!" Pitch held up his hands in surrender. A little too easily in Blues's opinion. "You can't blame me for trying, Sandy. You don't know what it's like to be weak and hated. It was stupid of me to mess with your dreams. So I'll tell you what..." Pitch's face suddenly changed to a sinister sneer. "You can have 'em back!"

Black sand suddenly erupted from everywhere around the three, forming into a massive herd of equine nightmares.

As Jack and Sandy took to the air and the sound of North's sleigh entering the fray cut the air, Blues charged forward and grabbed onto the nightmare that Pitch himself was riding.

"Get off!" Pitch snarled as the nightmare bucked and tried to throw Blues, but the prototype robot master wasn't so easy to dislodge.

As the Guardians carved through the army of nightmares left and right, Blues clawed his way up Pitch's steed, reaching out and

grabbing the shadow scythe as Pitch swung it his way and using the weapon to heft himself on top of the nightmare.

"You pathetic stubborn..." Pitch growled at him as the two wrestled with Pitch's scythe for a few moments.

"Flattery get you no–" Blues stumbled as Pitch dismissed the scythe and nearly fell off, grabbing Pitch himself at the last moment, trying to pull the living nightmare down with him.

"Let go of me!" Pitch demanded as more nightmares circled around them.

One came close enough to sideswipe Blues hard enough that even blocking with his shield knocked him loose from his struggle with Pitch and into the air. Another came near and Blues let it knock the shield away in favor of grabbing on and hauling himself atop the nightmare in a smooth practiced motion.

And then his eyes widened as he saw Pitch begin to form a black arrow aimed straight for the Guardian of good dreams.

Without a second thought, he flung himself towards the floating cloud of golden sand that Sandy rode upon and rolled to his feet right at the Guardian's back.

Right as Pitch loosed his arrow.

"Urk..."

Blues looked down at the black arrow sticking out of his chest. Funny... it didn't hurt...

"BLUES!" he heard Jack yell his name as Sandy turned around to stare in horror at the arrow in his chest, clearly understanding what it meant better than Blues himself did.

"NO!" Pitch screamed his frustration as Jack sped towards the embodiment of fear in righteous fury, glowing a bright wintery blue as

he did.

YES...

That was all Blues recalled before he blacked out.

COPY CHIP ACTIVATED.

SCANNING FOREIGN ENERGY.

FOREIGN ENERGY ASSIMILATED.

MASTER WEAPON 'NIGHTMARE' READY FOR USE.

Did you miss me?

ERROR: MASTER WEAPON 'NIGHTMARE' SELF-ACTIVATING...

"Honestly, it would be easier if I did write that rebellious streak out of him..."

ERROR: MASTER WEAPON 'NIGHTMARE' TARGETING NATIVE SYSTEMS...

"There's no room for last year's model."

MASTER WEAPON 'NIGHTMARE' LABELLED AS VIRAL MALWARE...

No? I missed you.

ATTEMPTING ANTI-VIRAL PURGE...

Now, now... None of that.

WARNING! ANTI-VIRAL PURGE FAILED. MASTER WEAPON 'NIGHTMARE' REMAINS ACTIVE...

"Far too free-willed. Completely unsuited to the contract. Building a new model would just take too long."

WARNING! MASTER WEAPON 'NIGHTMARE' AFFECTING COGNITIVE SYSTEMS...

"Far easier to remove the unnecessary subroutines and continue with you. You understand, don't you?"

WARNING!

I'm back for good this time.

WARNING!

Reality was screaming.

Are you sure that's not you?

"NO!" Blues yelled as he shot up suddenly in a torrent of fear, which turned to fury as he spotted the face of his tormentor. "YOU!" he yelled, turning his arm into a cannon and charging up. "I'LL NEVER LET YOU REWRITE MY MIND, DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

Do it! He was your father, and he betrayed you! He deserves to die!

"Woah, Blues, chill!" a white-haired teen interposed himself between Blues and the figure of his father... no, of North. Not Dr. Light, North. He was in the man's polar workshop. The teen was Jack. His... friend...

Bah... Something else, then...

Blues powered his arm cannon down and reformed it back into a hand.

His sister jumped in front of Rock as he fired, taking the shot to her unprotected chest.

Blues clutched his head as dark, sinister images assaulted it.

"You shot me! And you dare to call yourself our brother!" Roll accused with a gaping smoking hole in her torso.

"Hey there," Jack moved to support Blues, along with a floating cloud of golden sand, "easy now... We got you."

"Dad should have sent you to the scrap pile long ago!"

Jack and the others sat him gently back down.

Roll suddenly shifted to a blank-eyed Rock. "I mean, look," he said as he gestured from the rooftop to a city without power. Where smoke billowed from crashed vehicles and planes fell.

"It's okay," Jack told him. "You've been out for a few days, but we beat Pitch. Thanks to you saving Sandy, we drove him off before he could take another shot. Easter went off without a hitch and we got all the fairies and teeth back."

"You destroy everything you touch."

"And it's all thanks to you," Toothiana smiled gratefully.

Rock shifted into Dr. Light, who looked at Blues with total and complete disdain. "You are a failure in every way."

"No..." Blues protested, clutching his head. "I..."

"You are!" Light began to laugh, only for his features to melt into the familiar face of Dr. Wily. A Dr. Wily with eyes like Ra Moon. "You cling to your precious sense of 'self', never realizing that you lost it long ago!"

"You are very brave, my friend," North smiled.

"You cast it aside the night you cowardly ran from your father," Ra Wily continued, "and we destroyed what little was left the day we remade you to our specifications. You are now and forever a child of the darkness!"

"Yeah, mate," Bunnymund agreed.

"Admit it!"

"No...!" Blues yelled as the sinister images assaulted him, causing looks of worry to cross the Guardians faces. "I... I meant to do good..."

"Liar," a voice from behind made his systems run cold and he turned to see a familiar quadrupedal figure. One with a blue coat, magenta eyes, a rainbow tail and mane, and a look of utter loathing on her face.

"You did do good, mate," Bunnymund looked confused. As did the rest of the Guardians for that matter.

"Don't listen to those geeks. Listen to me. I'm the one who knows you best after all. The one who knows you better than the family you tossed aside like garbage. The one who always called, always wrote, always took time away from her own life to deal with your pathetic little self's pathetic little problems. I mean, you said I was your best friend, right? The one you could always trust to help you feel better when you were feeling like a little emo bitch?"

"Look," Jack spoke in a comforting tone, "whatever Pitch did to you, we can help. You just gotta believe."

"Then trust your best friend when I say that all those times I sacrificed the awesome stuff I wanted to do to help you deal with your pissy manure?"

"Believe...?" Blues laughed depressingly and closed his eyes.

"I should have never bothered."

"...I don't believe in anything..."

When he opened his eyes, he saw nothing around him save for the endless arctic expanse. Not even anomalous readings from his sensors.

The Guardians gaped as one when Blues had just... walked through them, the workshop, and out into the snow.

"Did he... just... stop believing?" Bunnymund asked what they were all thinking. "With us standing right in front of him?!"

"What did Pitch *do* to the boy...?" North voiced the rest.

The ever-silent Sandy firmed his features and ran to the nearest exit and floated out over the snow, Toothiana and Jack close on his heels. The Guardian of Dreams formed tendrils of golden sand that snaked towards their mutual friend, but when they got within a foot of the robot, the tendrils began to turn black. A black which tried to snake its way back to Sandy before he cut the connection.

"So..." Jack looked utterly lost, "this is what it's like to fail someone..."

"Here, boy, a scarf for your neck," Dr. Light laughed cruelly as he pulled the fabric taut in an attempt to choke the wearer.

Blues grasped frantically at the yellow fabric and tore it off, throwing it into the snow.

"No less than he deserves for what he let that man do to my daughter," Dr. Cossack declared from a judge's bench, banging his gavel.

"He's an evil, evil, person," a dirty and half-starved Kalinka agreed from a cage that hung from the ceiling.

"You can tell because he hides behind those shades of his, the coward," Tempo spat in disgust.

"I guess if he wants them so bad, we'll just have to bolt them to his head," Dr. Lalinde agreed.

Blues took his shades off before they could be used to harm him and contemplated discarding them in the snow or crushing them in his hand.

"No..." Toothiana shook her head vigorously. "I can't accept that."

The Guardian of Memories darted in front of the currently immobile robot boy and stared at his shadowed eyes.

"I know I don't have any of your teeth to do this with, but I'm the Guardian of Memories!" the Tooth Fairy declared as she focused. "That's got to count for something! So, please, if there's a happy childhood memory in you, *any* memory, please... remember it!"

"It's bright, father... It's hard to see..."

"You are an evil creature undeserving of happiness!"

"Heh..." Dr. Light chuckled as he pulled something out of his coat pocket. "I suppose I need to adjust the sensitivity when we get back to the lab, but until then, here."

"A foul brother!"

"What are these?"

"A worse son!"

"They're shades, son. They help people see in bright light."

"A base villain!"

"Wow..."

Blues put the shades back on and looked to where he'd dropped his scarf.

"Father, look at that!"

"You're broken."

"Oh, something caught your eye? My, but that looks like a fine scarf. And on sale too."

"Now and forever."

"Thank you, father!"

"The Break Man."

"I'm not broken," Blues whispered as he bent down to pick the scarf up and wrap it around his neck. For some reason, he felt a bit better. A bit stronger. The torment wasn't gone, but he could bear it now. "And I'm not the Break Man."

At least for a little while longer.

Not yet, perhaps. But then, we have all the time in the multiverse...

11.?) No, Wily's still not looping. Wile E. might be though. And who knows, maybe they *are* related...

11.X) Blues seems to be getting better. Happens most decidedly after My Mega Pony and before 11.!.

11.4) Apologies for any translation errors. I use google translate for this stuff.

English version of 11.4:

Zero stepped out of the capsule and looked himself over. This was... This was different. Usually the ultimate armor capsule just gave him armor that was black where his normal set was red, with enhancements that, while impressive for a man who couldn't have had first-hand knowledge of his systems, were still fairly lackluster in comparison to what X tended to get.

This set though... This set was still black, but it had a mouthpiece and blade-like protrusions over his shoulders that looked like vestigial wings. Ones that Zero could tell were able to manifest an energy membranes that would serve as wings. Combined with the jet propulsion system on his back and he could easily maintain flight. Then there were the wrist-mounted energy blades that were a fair bit stronger than his usual beam saber.

Yes, he could definitely get used to something like this.

11.3) Many baseline villains suffer comical breakdowns when confronted with power escalation and out-of-context abilities from loopers. Wily is one of those who can analyze out-of-context abilities and escalate right back.

11.1) The first 'Meeting of the Mega Men'.

11.11) *Can't comment. Too busy laughing.*

11.8675309) Yeah, something like this was gonna happen sooner or later.

11.5) After Tirek Sunstar from the Equestrian fused Loop, Rita Repulsa's really not that intimidating.

11.9) Government Issued Joe. To be continued.

11.2) Gotta love typos.

11.7) In the issue 42 of the Archie comic, the evil counterpart to Duo that I've been calling Slur as a placeholder was revealed to be named Trio (and betrayed another comrade named Quartet). I'm probably still going to call him Slur from time-to-time (because it's a cool name and the Megaverse has already been established as buggy), but he now has a canon name! One with pun potential!

Also, Han prefers to shoot first. Because in his mind, if you aren't shooting first, you may not be shooting at all.

11.10) Josuke Higashikata and his stand Crazy Diamond from JoJo's Bizarre Adventure. Because I figured that if Josuke interprets insults to his hairstyle as insults to the man who saved his life, then he'd naturally take a claim that he's disgracing the hairstyle as him disgracing that same man. Cue heroic blue screen of death.

Of course it would only work this way once, but then Wily apparently wasn't expecting it to work this way in the first place…

11.6) Baymax is adorable. Your arguments are invalid. (And I am psyched to see Big Hero 6 this weekend!)

11.!) This... This isn't good...

Battle in the Network: Failed Attempts

Battle in the Network: Failed Attempts

Forenote: Fanfiction. net doesn't like dots in between two words with no spaces. So all of the navi names will be written like so: X. exe

---

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 1 using 961|\/|A6- a|\| (406 (A|\||)1|)A73 and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

"Lan, wake up!" Megaman. exe shouted at his eternally lazy netOp.

Lan continued to snore.

"Lan, if you don't get up, you'll be late for school!" Megaman. exe tried again.

Lan's snoring was drowned out by an urgent news update.

"PET NetNews! 'WWW crime on the rise!; It says the WWW plan to control the net might be starting!"

"Wait a second," Megaman. exe paused at the news. "Has this already happen3|)4c.4l4WWW?...

ATTEMPT FAILED.

"Oh, for the love of creation!" Hephaestus yelled at his terminal. He'd set up a standard co-Anchor arrangement between that Lan kid and his spirit partner, and twin, Hub and the attempt hadn't even loaded the Anchor correctly!

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 2 using Primary Anchor candidate and 50VL-80V|\||) (0-a|\|(406 (A|\||)1|)A73.

Lan watched as the leader of Gospel, and why did he want to call him 'Sean' anyway?, laughed at himself and Chaud.

"Never thought you'd get this far, but you are too late! Bug fusion is complete! All that's left is to press this button and the SuperNavi will activate! It's name... Breadnought. exe!"

Lan blinked. *'What in the world is a breadn0V&7wnrfjr95./,...*

ATTEMPT FAILED.

Hephaestus swore as he typed away. He'd gotten the primary Anchor candidate active this time, so of course now the co-Anchor wasn't loading properly.

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 3 using Primary Anchor candidate and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

"Ah, I sense it... A warrior's power!" the floating purple genie-type navi whose lower body trailed off into a wisp of smoke attached to an oil lamp declared as Megaman. exe approached. "I hope you kn0–"

The navi's form glitched and resolved into a red and white navi with green bowling balls for arms.

"–w that I am BowllllLLL–

The navi's form glitched again and returned to the genie.

"–Mistman, rank 2!111111!–"

The navi glitched again and returned to the bowling-themed navi.

'The heck...?' Megaman. exe thought to himself as the form switching only sped up.

"WwWWwwwwhHHHHHOoooo0o000000 AaaaarRReeEE33e Y0000|_|?/?HGGKDJBMB..."

ATTEMPT FAILED.

"Great, just great..." Hephaestus grumbled. The codes for a couple of netnavis named Bowlman and Mistman were vying for the same spot in events and the struggle was creating a serious error in the system. Hmm... Maybe if he paired them up, at least for the activation, it would correct the error...

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 4 using Primary Anchor candidate and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

Megaman. exe blinked as the large blue navi landed in front of him. He wasn't sure why, but he'd been expecting someone more... red.

"My name is... X..." the navi stated. "Where... am I? Are you from Maverick Hunter HhhHHHHQQqqqQQq&43t.b/8?...

ATTEMPT FAILED.

Hephaestus blinked a few times as he examined the file on the most recent failed attempt. How in Yggdrasil had X Looped in there? He poked a few related areas of code and noted that everything *seemed* to be working just fine...

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 5 using Primary Anchor candidate and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

Lan and Megaman. exe blinked as one when they saw the solo netnavi hanging around in the undernet. He was a lot more... purple than they had been expecting.

"Wow, you came all this way..." the purple netnavi with a bow and arrow greeted. "I am Hawkman, and I accept your chal13|\|&3!111!1!11!...

ATTEMPT FAILED.

Okay, this was no isolated incident. Somehow non-native data was leaking into the activation attempts and screwing them up.

(Leonite, with some minor additions by me)

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 6 using Primary Anchor candidate and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

"I'm Shuko... and this is my Navi, Aquaman," Lan raised an eyebrow... some of his memories were saying it was Spoutman. exe, others said that Aquaman. exe was the right name... and then Shuko showed him the Navi screen. Which probably explained why she seemed so,... confident when his memories said otherwise.

For instead of the miniature perpetually nervous water-themed navi with a spout coming out of his head, there was a navi with an orange torso, green legs, and yellow hair. With a stylized 'A' on the navi symbol and carrying a rather sturdy looking trident.

"Outrageous! Some new friends for us to meet Shuko?"

'What is this I don'7 3v3n;ekg4[5y4.

ATTEMPT FAILED.

Ah, there it was. The hole that was causing stray outside code to leak into the branch's section. A quick patch job and he would be ready to try again. Now if only the rest of it was so easy...

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 7 using Primary Anchor candidate and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

"What's wrong Megaman?" Lan asked even as he got a weird feeling that these events had happened before.

"I thought I heard Iris's voice just now..." the navi inhabiting a copybot replied, getting the same odd feeling.

"Lan, wake up!" Lan's mother called up to him as Lan sat up in his bed confused, and a moment later he heard the news that WWW crime was on the rise.

"Didn't we do this years ag&Ggg&&&gg&&&7..."

ATTEMPT FAILED.

Hephaestus stared at his terminal. That was not supposed to happen... Not while the Loop was active anyway...

(Leonite)

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 8 using Primary Anchor candidate and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

Lan and Megaman. exe were on edge. How couldn't they be? Both knew at this point that they had memories that they shouldn't... and something weird was going on. Still, things seemed to be going as smoothly as ever... and considering that they were currently fused and staring down Dark Megaman that should say something about their lives.

"Stop right there Dark Megaman!" Lan shouted as he raised his buster at Dark Megaman.

"Lan, something feels off. More than it should be." Hub's voice spoked directly into Lan's head due to the cross fusion, even as Dark Megaman started chuckling.

"Dark Megaman? No!" The copycat stated... before he grabbed his face and started pulling... before it came off like a mask, revealing Maylu's face, but with plenty of black make up. "I am Dark MaYLu" he %!i#d %^

"N#^O$#%#?/OOOO!" Lan and M/gaman s screamed, their body glowing brightly... Lan had suspected that it might happen again, so the two were attempting to synchronize to stop it. And it was working it wQ^%#^l-...

ATTEMPT FAILED.

ADVISE LOCKING OF 'FULL SYNCHRO' ABILITY UNTIL INCREASED STABILITY CAN BE FOUND.

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt 9 using Primary Anchor candidate and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

Lan shook off the weird dream he'd had and got out of bed. As he went down for breakfast, he noted that his house seemed a little... off somehow.

"Megaman? Does something seem off to you?" he asked his netnavi as he grabbed some toast and wished his mom good morning. She didn't seem to hear him.

"Not really, Lan," the navi replied from his PET as Lan made sure he had everything and opened the front door. "Weird dream?"

"Yeah, how'd you–"

Lan froze as he saw what was outside.

"–know?" Lan finished weakly.

"Lan?" Megaman. exe asked with worry for his operator. "What's wrong?"

Lan wordlessly picked up the PET and held it so that Megaman. exe could see the landscape before him.

"What in...?" the navi's eyes widened at the impossible sight.

The entire world, from the ground to the sky, as far as the eye could see, was buggy. As in corrupted net code buggy. Nothing matched up how it was supposed to and colors were not only a matter of whim, they'd apparently decided to detach themselves from the objects they were supposed to be on.

"The hell is happ3|\|!|\|&$%V%...

ATTEMPT FAILED.

(OathToOblivion)

Hephaestus cursed. Section 4, the 'Battle Network' section, was being particularly frustrating to get online. Specifically, it was that damn second half of the baseline. How was he supposed to fix that?!

"Have no fear, the mighty Apollo is here!" And then, of course, there was him. Apollo, the admin for the Solar Boy Django Loops, which had a Tandem Run that intersected Battle Network a number of times.

"Having problems, brother?" Apollo asked.

"No, I'm making a sandwich; yes, I'm having problems! It's that blasted second half of the baseline where your Loop comes in! Yggdrasil is getting two conflicting sections of baseline for every section that's organized into a game in the Hub! There was a similar problem earlier, but that was much easier to fix than this! And I can't even access the Anchors' memories for this because that specific part got corrupted. They don't know any more than we do! So what do you think I'm doing?!" he ranted to the actually-quiet-for-once Sun God.

Apollo considered it for a second before replying. "...Why not just combine the conflicting details?"

Hephaestus froze, before facepalming. *'It's a sad day when Apollo points out what should be obvious,'* he thought. *'I need a vacation if I'm slipping like this.'*

Attempt 1) I guess Lan never Woke Up. Badum-tish.

Attempt 2) Mmmmm... Breadnought... Dangit, now I'm hungry...

Attempt 3) Oh, just call them the MistBowl, invite a couple of sports teams over to play, and be done with it.

Attempt 4) X got a little lost there...

Attempt 5) Hawkman is clearly not Larkman.

Attempt 6) To those who don't get it, Aquaman from Batman the Brave and the Bold. Because they have the same names.

Attempt 7) Lolwut?

Attempt 8) I think Lan and Hub might have broken something...

Attempt 9) Yep, they broke something.

Thanksgiving Mega-Mini-Special

Thanksgiving Mega-Mini-Special

Roll hummed to herself as she swept the lab. The current Loop was a rather strange variant, partly due to what she and Rock had taken to calling the 'flashback glitch'.

The way it seemed to work was that, upon Awakening, Loop memories didn't fully integrate. Instead, they only gave general information on their current lives, the Loop setting, and a few other things that were immediately relevant. Further Loop memories only integrated when they became relevant to the situation. Even knowledge of good friends and family weren't accessible unless the person(s) were directly encountered or spoken of by someone else.

The other thing that made this a strange variant was that Dr. Wily had never worked at the lab. At least not that she or Rock could tell from their currently integrated Loop memories.

It may have been a strange variant, but that didn't make it a bad one.

"Roll?" the voice of her father cut into her thoughts.

"Yes dad?" she turned to face the man who was looking rather worried.

"You remember that we agreed to host Thanksgiving dinner this year, right?"

Roll blinked. She did recall that. Even though the holiday wasn't relevant in every Loop, in this one Dr. Light and several of his friends without extended families had decided to get together for the annual feast, happening... Oh dear...

That was another thing about the 'flashback glitch'. It could be all too easy to lose track of the time and date if you weren't directly reminded.

"Yes... I'm afraid I lost track of the date working on my latest project and with the run on the grocery stores this time every year, I'm afraid there's only one place left that will have what we need. If you're willing to go, I'm going to have to give you some combat upgrades, and..."

Roll got a sinking feeling in her processor that seemed to come with the sense of more Loop memories about to integrate. She really hoped this wasn't what she thought it was.

"You don't mean...?"

"Yes, Roll..." Dr. Light sighed. "I'm afraid I have to ask you to go to the Wily Mart."

'You know, even if it is Wily, having to wear my Mega Woman armor to go to the grocery store feels so weird...' Roll thought to herself as she walked through the sliding doors of the Wily Mart. In front of her spread out a large shopping area, mostly due to the fact that the various grocery departments needed plenty of room for combat, separated out by a nice grid of 'no combat' zones where the shoppers present (all combat-modified robots of one sort or another) kept their carts so their intended purchases didn't get damaged.

"Welcome to Wily Mart!" the recorded voice of Dr. Wily greeted her cheerfully as she stepped inside. "Where you can enjoy quality products at everyday low prices! Assuming you survive that is! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Okay, that's more like it," Roll found she felt strangely more at ease with Wily declaring his intent to destroy all challengers as she grabbed a cart and began to plan out her shopping list. Many shoppers claimed that the Wily Mart Master in charge of the

kitchenware department was the hardest to deal with, which meant there was a good chance his weapon would be able to help in defending against the rest of the store's sentries.

"You wish to claim great deals on food preparation devices?" the cylindrical iron-armored glass-topped robot declared as he faced off against her. "Then you must first overcome the mighty Pot Man and his Frying Pan of DOOM!"

Roll blinked a few times.

"You do realize that makes you sound like a proponent of controlled substances, right?" she asked.

"DAMNIT!" Pot Man fumed, his armor actually turning slightly red as his systems heated up from sheer fury. "I AM *NOT* RELATED TO *DRUGS* ! WHEN WILL YOU PEOPLE GET THAT THROUGH YOUR STEEL-PLATED SKULLS?!"

"Okay, sorry, I–"

"IT'S TOO LATE FOR APOLOGIES!" Pot Man screamed as he dashed forward, swinging his frying pan weapon in a power strike.

Roll had beaten Pot Man and claimed both the necessary cookware and his Frying Pan weapon. She'd then made her way to the produce section to get the fruit and vegetables needed for several dishes, only to come up a bit short at the sight of the Wily Mart Master that was in charge of the produce department.

"I am the noble guardian of the freshest produce found anywhere!"

He wielded a giant leek like a war baton in one thin noodly hand, attached to an equally thin noodly arm. The other arm and both legs matched.

"Defender of the choicest farm-grown fruits and vegetables in all the world!"

His face consisted of a monocle, giant eyes, nose, mustache and lips and atop his head was a military hat. The head itself was more his entire body. Large, brown...

"I am–"

...and in the recognizably irregular shape of a well-known root vegetable.

"Mr. Potato Head?" Roll blinked curiously.

The vegetable-themed robot began to fume and emit a smell not unlike a baked potato.

"Captain Tater! Captain Tater!" he raged. "Great champion of health! Not a *children's* toy!"

"Whoa, hey, it's an honest–"

"LEEK SLAP!"

Roll blocked the vegetable baton with the Frying Pan weapon she'd gotten from Pot Man, used the force as leverage to send herself into a spinning strike that put her behind her opponent and in the perfect position to clock him upside his giant head.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!" the floral-themed female robot laughed as Roll stepped into the floral department. "If you want a nice floral arrangement, then you'll have to best me, the superb Flower Woman, and my Bouquet Bombs first cutie!"

Roll blinked and considered the female model with armor in the model of a formal gown and seemingly made from giant flower petals.

"You do know I'm also a girl, right?"

"I don't limit myself to a single gender model, dearie," Flower Woman smirked and whipped her arm out, producing a hand-held bouquet that she prepared to throw at her opponent.

"ATTENTION FLORAL DEPARTMENT. PLEASE DIAL 201."

"Oh, bother," Flower Woman sighed as she flicked her arm again to throw the bouquet bomb straight up where it detonated harmlessly about halfway to the high ceiling. "Please excuse me, I have to take this."

As Flower Woman went to pick up the employee phone, Roll quietly and quickly made her selection and snuck up behind Flower Woman while she was speaking to whoever was on the other end of the line.

"Thanks for all your help!" Roll smiled as she tagged Flower Woman with her hand and scanned her systems before taking off towards her cart with her selection.

"Hey! Wait–" Flower Woman sputtered in indignation and confusion. "YOU CAN'T DO THAT!"

"Watch me!" Roll stuck her tongue out as she continued to retreat.

"Wow you're pretty good," Roll admitted as she used her Frying Pan weapon to block the Cleaver weapon swung by... well, a giant anthropomorphic robotic shrimp. Also known as Fresh Shrimp, head of the butcher department.

"Ah, it is always good to have one's skills appreciated!" Fresh Shrimp beamed as he continued to spiral-slice the ham in between his attempts to attack her. "Especially from one so skilled themselves! Will you be needing anything else today? We have some excellent salmon..."

"Will that be all ma'am?" the robot master in charge of the deli and bakery, who frankly looked like a walking sandwich made from a giant baguette, asked as he finished gathering the selection of rolls and cheeses Roll had requested.

Honestly, it had Roll somewhat on edge. All of the others had tried to attack her, so when this one hadn't, it made her wonder what he was up to.

"Well, then, let me *wrap that up for you* ! Sandwich Wrap!" The seemingly helpful robot master thrust his arms out at her, and a stream of plastic wrap shot out to bind her in place.

Roll jumped over the attack and called up the Leek Slap and swung it like a sword as she descended upon her opponent.

"Thank you, come again!" Sandwich Man chuckled as he collapsed from the blow.

"I'm the Spice Girl!" the... walking hourglass-shaped wide-bottomed saltshaker (Roll had to suppress a groan at the pun hidden in that) grinned cheekily as she saw the yellow-armored shopper. "And you wannabe spice up your life? You something kinda funny, girl! Let's see if you can't dance! Salt and Pepper Blaster!"

Roll dodged the white and black shotgun blasts and grabbed some basil.

"Come on sister! I know you wanna have some fun!" Spice Girl shouted as she continued firing. "Let's get all Saturday night divas up in here! Who do you think you are?"

"You're just an endless barrel of namesake reference, aren't you?" Roll sighed as she called up the Frying Pan again and moved to engage. She had more stuff to get and being shot at wasn't helping her get it.

"VIVA FOREVER!"

"Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!" Roll's latest opponent laughed, and she could really only stare as he did so. The robot was... well, he might look like Humpty Dumpty, were it not for a familiar pair of circular shades, an equally familiar orange mustache, or the red and black design on his armor shell. Not to mention the voice that matched. "You dare to challenge the Egg Man? Lord and master of the Dairy department? Have at you! Egg Knocker!"

Roll summoned the Frying Pan and blocked the projectiles fired at her, the eggs shattering and spraying sticky egg goo everywhere when they struck the cast iron surface.

"No...!" Egg Man gulped as he spotted her weapon. "Not the Frying Pan!"

"It's mine!" a blue robot tugged on one end of a package of toilet paper.

"As if! I saw it first!" a purple robot heaved back from the other end of the same package.

"Well I grabbed it first!" the blue one retorted and yanked again.

"Um..." Roll tried to politely interject, "could you perhaps do that somewhere you aren't blocking th–"

"BUTT OUT!" they both yelled at her before going right back to squabbling over the increasingly damaged piece of merchandise.

Roll sighed and once more activated the Frying Pan weapon and clocked them both over the head so she could get to an intact package of toilet paper. Sure, there might be more embarrassing things to run out of when guests were over, but it couldn't be many. Better get more paper towels while she was there too.

"Aww..." a voice whined behind her, causing her to turn around and see... A giant anthropomorphic roll of toilet paper with the end of the roll feeding into the arm shaped like a cannon. "I was enjoying that..."

"Let me guess... Tissue Man?"

"Got it in one, miss!" the robot beamed before aiming its cannon at her. "But since you took out my entertainment, you'll have to substitute! TP Blaster!"

Roll dashed to the side to avoid the streams of tissue sent her way, regardless of how silly it sounded as a weapon, and returned fire with the Salt and Pepper Blaster, only to blink as her opponent started... laughing?

"Nice try, miss!" Tissue Man chuckled and fired his weapon again, forcing Roll to somersault out of the way. "But I'm specially quilted for ultra shock absorption!"

"How about eggs?" Roll asked as she switched to the Egg Knocker. She was so using this guy's weapon on Skull Fortress next Halloween.

"Ah... less fond of those..." Tissue Man replied nervously.

Roll sighed heavily as she brought the paper products back to her cart and...

'Wait... where's my cart?' she blinked at the distinct lack of such. *'No... don't tell me...'*

Roll looked around frantically for any sign of her hard-won groceries and spotted a subdued gray female-model robot trying to quietly sneak away with a cart that looked very much like the one Roll was missing. Right down to how the groceries were stacked.

"Hey! That's my cart!" Roll yelled as she took off after the cart thief.

"I don't see your name on it!" the gray robot yelled back as she began running herself.

"Thief!" Roll yelled as she jumped and tackled the other robot and began wrestling with her. "Give me back my groceries!"

"Are you nuts?" the gray robot yelled back. "Get off of me! Quick!"

Suddenly both of them were engulfed in the light of teleportation and found themselves in an area labeled 'Customer Service'.

"Aw, hell..." the gray robot cursed. "Now you've done it you idiot."

"Excuse me?!" Roll snapped. "I'm not the one going around stealing other people's carts!"

"It seems we have a cart dispute shoppers!" Wily's voice cackled over the intercom. "Which means only one thing! Customer Service Trial By Combat!"

A giant hulking red figure rose up from behind the customer service desk. A rather familiar figure with one giant eye in the middle of a semi-solid red mass with thick arms and legs.

"Your customer service representative today is the Red Devil! The cart goes to the last shopper standing!"

"Damnit! I have a budget to meet!" the gray robot whined in a voice Roll could now deduce was being transmitted from a distance as the Red Devil began its assault.

"Well next time *get your own damn groceries* !" Roll spat back as she dodged the masses of red from the Red Devil's body and prepared her counter attack. She still had a list to finish!

Roll grumbled to herself as she approached the frozen foods section. That had... Seriously, the only good thing she could say about the 'customer service' challenge was that her cart and its contents were locked to her. By way of a selective forcefield.

In any case, she was almost done with her list. Just a few frozen vegetables, some whipped cream, a few pie crusts, and–

"Attention shoppers! This is the guardian of the frozen foods department, Frozen Turkey, letting you know that the Wily Mart has only two frozen turkeys left!"

'Sonofa...' Roll swore as the store began rumbling from every shopper present making a beeline for the frozen foods department. *'How the* hell *did I leave that for last?!'*

She *hated* how the flashback glitch worked at times...

Roll breathed heavily to circulate precious cooling air over her taxed systems as she glared down Frozen Turkey, a pile of downed shoppers in her wake.

"Aha!" the giant frost-covered anthropomorphic turkey robot gobbled with glee. "One challenger has emerged from the pack, but can she defeat the final obstacle and claim her prize? Let's find out! Refrigeration Ray!"

Roll dodged the cold ray from the robot's optics and turned both arms into cannons. "I am out of patience buster! Salt and Pepper Blaster!"

"Owowowowow!" Frozen Turkey yelped repeatedly as the shotgun-like blasts laid him out in short order. "Alas, the guardian has fallen! Step forth and claim your prize, noble shopper!"

Roll resisted the urge to shoot the robot again to shut him up and approached the display that held the final few frozen turkeys...

...only to find it empty.

"Oh, come *on* !" she yelled in frustration.

"Ah, someone else grabbed it while you were distracted?" Frozen Turkey asked from his prone position. "Sorry, but that does happen."

Roll sighed. At least she could... *'Wait a second...'*

She turned an ominous glare at the downed turkey robot.

"It...? As in... *singular* ...?"

"Um... yeah?" Frozen Turkey blinked.

"I thought you said there were *two* left..."

"Well, yeah!" Frozen Turkey grinned. "That one and me!"

Roll remained silent as the robot laughed at his little joke. Quietly, she formed the Frying Pan and began to smack the cast iron portion into her palm repeatedly as she approached the downed robot master.

"Er... wait a sec... AAHHH! It was a joke! I'm sorry! GYAAAH! THAT DOESN'T BEND THAT WAY!"

"Did you find everything you needed?" the Joe model running the checkout counter Roll had decided to use asked.

"Everything but the bleeping frozen turkey," Roll grumbled, not even caring enough to dedicate runtime to disabling her vocal censor.

"Ah, that," the Checkout Joe rolled its single optic. "He pulls that every year. He'll probably have a fresh shipment in tomorrow morning, bright and early for the last-minute battle royale rush."

"You're assuming he can pull his head out of his–"

The Checkout Joe snorted in amusement as he began to scan the items while another sacked them. "Anyway, how will you be paying today? Cash, credit, check, or try to rush the exit?"

"Credit," Roll sighed heavily. "Is that last one seriously an option?"

"Yep. Pretty popular one with many shoppers too. Though we'd have to do our best to stop you of course. Plus you wouldn't have the option of getting help out to your vehicle."

"I think I can carry the groceries myself just fine, thanks," Roll gave the Joe a bemused look.

"Oh, the offer's not to help carry the groceries. It's more of an honor guard to protect against the opportunists who like to ambush successful shoppers in the parking lot. Red guy who grabbed the last turkey elected not to, but he also went out through the roof so I doubt he needed it."

Roll blinked. "Okay, I think I'll take you up on that offer."

"Excellent choice, ma'am," the Joe's optic morphed into an 'eye grin'. "If you would just swipe your card, please."

Roll went to do so, and stopped as she processed the total of her purchase. "Wow... that is a lot lower than I was expecting... How do you afford to stay in business?"

"Web broadcasts, DVD sales of battle highlights, and you'd be surprised how much name brand companies like the idea of shoppers literally fighting over their products. And since you've paid for your purchase, we'll be happy to send you a highlight reel of your shopping experience free of charge."

Roll pondered that for a long moment. "...Oh, why not?"

"Oh, hey Roll!" Rock greeted as she brought the groceries in. "How was shopping?"

"Two words: Wily. Mart."

"Ouch... Still, everything's set for tomorrow once we thaw the turkey with dad's instant defroster."

"Er..." Roll got a pained look. "About that... Someone else grabbed the last one before I could..."

"Someone in red?" Rock asked, grinning as he held up a familiar yellow scarf. "It seems a certain someone left it on the front porch wrapped in this shortly before you got back. He..." Rock's smile fell as he held out the item to Roll and continued, "he left a note too. Seems he won't be joining us for a while..."

Roll blinked and accepted the scarf from Rock, taking a moment to read the note pinned to the fabric.

Sorry I won't be joining you this time. Or perhaps anytime for the foreseeable future. I've... had something of a relapse recently and I'm not sure how much I can trust myself around you... or father... Especially father. I can handle it for now though and I'm meeting lots of interesting people in my travels. Anyway, hope you have a good holiday.

Your brother,

Blues - .

-) To everyone who celebrates with their family at this time of year, and to all those who for whatever reason can't, I wish you the best.

The Defenders of Wily Mart:

Frozen Turkey (Frozen Foods) - Refrigeration Ray - Weakness: Salt & Pepper Blaster/Frying Pan

Spice Girl (Dry Goods) - Salt & Pepper Blaster - Weakness: TP Blaster/Frying Pan

Egg Man (Dairy Department) - Egg Knocker - Weakness: Frying Pan

Tissue Man (Household Items) - TP Blaster -Weakness: Egg Knocker

Pot Man (Kitchenware) - Frying Pan - Weakness: Refrigeration Ray

Captain Tater (Produce Department) - Leek Slap - Weakness: Cleaver/Frying Pan

Sandwich Man (Deli & Bakery) - Sandwich Wrap - Weakness: Leek Slap/Frying Pan

Flower Woman (Floral Department) - Bouquet Bomb - Weakness: Sandwich Wrap/Frying Pan

Fresh Shrimp (Butcher Department) - Cleaver - Weakness: Bouquet Bomb/Frying Pan

Red Devil (Customer Service) - Weakness: Bouquet Bomb

Checkout Joes (Checkout)

Battle in the Network: Do it Again

Battle in the Network: Do it Again

"Okay," Hephaestus said, mostly to himself, "the conflicting baselines are as combined as they're going to get without making things worse. Code leaks have been plugged, general stability has been increased to where the 'Full Synchro' ability can be restored, and the Anchor and soul-bound co-Anchor candidates are ready to go."

"The mighty Apollo then hereby decrees that this party shall be started!" the sun god declared from where he had somehow set up a reclining beach chair with his portable terminal in Hephaestus's office. One of the Valkyries, Brynhildr, had a sour expression as she set down a cooler filled with a variety of drinks and snacks. Enough that Hephaestus would be completely surprised if there needed to be a second trip. "Hey, thanks babe!" Apollo gave the Aesir warrior his sunniest smile.

Brynhildr turned to glare at Apollo with a look that would have sent Ares running to hide behind Hera's skirts. Apollo, proving his general lack of good sense, didn't seem intimidated. She then bent down, reached over, and grabbed the sun god's ear and twisted it painfully, getting a satisfying yelp out of the eternal bachelor (and self-proclaimed playboy) as she spoke from no more than an inch away.

"If you ever hit on me or my shield-sisters like you've been doing again, I will personally carve out your spleen and make you eat it," she hissed. A moment later, she had released Apollo's ear and stormed out into the reception area, slamming the door in such a way that made very clear she, and probably Herfjötur and Eir as well, would not be returning so long as the sun god with the over-inflated sense of self-importance was there.

"Such a way with the ladies you have," Hephaestus tried to hide his smirk. Though he didn't try too hard.

"Yeah, well," Apollo rubbed his ear and tried to salvage what remained of his dignity, "the mighty Apollo would never use his A-game on another dude's hotties. Totally against the man-code and all that."

"Uh-huh," Hephaestus rolled his eyes. Granted, Apollo was far from the worst womanizer in the heavens. Mostly he was an incurable flirt with little-to-no appreciation for tact, but he never resorted to any of the, in his own words 'sleazeballing', tactics. (1) Mostly because he valued what little familial love and respect his twin sister, the moon goddess Artemis, still had for him too much to risk it for a fling. "Well, all that's left is for you to approve the Tandem Run with your boy Django and we're good to go."

"Oh, of course!" Apollo recovered. "The mighty Apollo will be happy to do this for you, dear brother, once you sooth his concerns over any possible dangers!"

Hephaestus sighed. "For the last time, with the activation of the first few sections of this branch and the breaking-up of the composite viral consciousness, there is no longer any danger of another Crash event! Your Anchor is in no danger of permanent damage!"

"The mighty Apollo accepts your assurances, and approves this Loop!" Apollo somehow managed to pose grandly in his beach chair, holding a glass of lemonade with one of those little umbrellas that he hadn't had a moment ago, and hitting a key on his portable terminal.

Hephaestus just rolled his eyes and started the Loop.

Yggdrasil Log: Linked Loop activation attempt X using Primary Anchor candidate and soul-bound co-Anchor candidate.

"What's up with the funky numbering?" Apollo asked suddenly. "You told the mighty Apollo everything was cool."

"This branch has been doing that lately," Hephaestus admitted. "It's a minor and benign issue, which means it's a lot further down my to-do list than this activation Loop is."

"Ah, cool bro," Apollo nodded in a way he probably thought made him look wise and tolerant. (2)

"Lan, wake up!" Megaman. exe yelled from his PET.

Lan continued snoring.

"If you don't get up, you'll be late for school!" Megaman. exe yelled again, and then paused. That was weird. He had this feeling like he'd had this feeling that he'd done this before. *'Is there such a thing as recursive deja-vu?'*

Lan grumbled as he started to wake up.

Suddenly, the PET lit up as a news alert came through. "PET NetNews! 'WWW crime on the rise!' It says the WWW plan to control the net might be starting!"

"Ugh..." Lan moaned as he sat up. "That's weird, I could swear I felt I'd heard this before before. Is there such a thing as recursive deja-vu?"

"That's funny," Megaman. exe blinked from the PET, "I was just thinking the same thing. Hey, you've got mail from Dad, too! It says 'Sorry I couldn't get off work Sunday, I'll be home soon. Here's a present for you'! And there's some BattleChip data attached!"

"Cool," Lan yawned. "Maybe it'll take my mind of this crazy dream I had."

"You too, huh?" Megaman. exe sympathized.

"Yeah, it..." Lan paused for a moment. "Wait, can NetNavis even dream?"

"Dunno," Megaman. exe admitted. "But I don't know what else to call it. Something that freaky couldn't have possibly been real." (3)

"Yo dawg," Apollo did his best 'gangsta' impression, "we heard you like deja-vu! So we put deja-vu in your deja-vu so you can think you done this before while you think you done this before!"

"Are you going to do this the entire time?" Hephaestus groaned. Apollo's answering grin didn't reassure him. (4)

Lan was in shock. Everything happening since waking up that day had been so... familiar. Like he and Megaman. exe had done it before. Even... even this.

They had defeated Magicman. exe only for Wily to transmit some LifeVirus data that let the wizard-themed navi hit Megaman. exe with a super-powerful attack that had left him critical. It... it was just...

"Lan..." the voice of Chaud cut into his thoughts as he held out a program chip of some kind. "Your father gave me this... here."

Lan took the program chip on autopilot and plugged it into his PET for analysis. "Hub. bat...?"

This... this too seemed familiar, and now Lan was getting a sense of what was about to happen. But... it wasn't possible... was it?

He could just hear an incoming call being made.

"Dr. Hikari," Chaud spoke to the person on the other end, Lan's father. "I'm sorry, I was too late..."

"It's fine, Chaud," Dr. Hikari waved off the apology. "Lan, listen to me! You can still save Megaman!"

"But..." Lan started to protest automatically before the weird pre-emptive deja-vu feeling hit again. "Okay... what do I do?"

"Apply the Hub. bat to Megaman," his father replied, "there may still be time... But before you use Hub. bat, I have to tell you something. It might make it... hard for you to use Megaman... OK?"

"I..." Lan hesitated before gathering his courage. "I'll do anything if it might save Megaman!"

"Then, listen..." Dr. Hikari began. "About 10 years ago, I was working on a new kind of Navi..."

"Lan..." Apollo wheezed in a deep voice, like that Anakin kid did when he got stuck in a life support suit, "he... is your brother! Join with Hub and become more powerful than Wily can imagine! Go forth and defeat the LifeVirus with your immense and powerful Schwartz, and once you have save the world, you and your brother shall use that same immense and powerful Schwartz to woo the fair Mayl and her navi Roll as your girlfriends! ...Holding off, of course, on certain activities until you're older because you crazy kids aren't ready for that yet."

"This is seriously what you do when you think no one is watching, isn't it?" Hephaestus deadpanned.

"Actually, I do that all the time," Apollo grinned.

Hephaestus facepalmed. (5)

Lan watched as the Hub. bat finished loading. He knew what his... brother... was going to say, but he found it didn't really matter to him. So long as he came back.

"Hub!" he yelled into the PET. "It's me, Lan! Wake up!"

"La..n...?" the navi groaned as he sat up. "What happened to me? Did you... call me Hub?"

"Hub..." Dr. Hikari admitted. "I've told Lan everything. We used the Hub. bat to bring you back after your injury..."

"I don't care that you never told me," Lan pressed on. "I'm just glad you're alright!"

"Heh..." the navi with a human soul rubbed the back of his head. "I know the feeling. I was always glad just seeing you happy even if I couldn't be out there with you."

"So..." Lan hesitated. Even if he thought he knew the answer, the question still needed to be asked, "how do we do this now, you and me? I mean, you're not just my navi, you're my brother..."

"Just be yourself!" the blue navi laughed. "Same as always! And I'll be myself, Megaman!"

"...Right," Lan smiled. "...OK! Let's go, Megaman!"

Wily stared in utter shock. That Hikari boy and his navi had... defeated the LifeVirus? Not just defeated, they'd trounced it! Danced around every attack like they could see it coming a mile away! "M-M-My LifeVirus!" he stuttered. "What, what, What have you done!? My baby! My WWW! Nooooo!"

"Warning! Warning!" alarms began to blare. "Virus leak! All systems malfunctioning! Self-destruct sequence activated!"

"Next time, don't build your evil lair like a pinto, you jerk," Apollo nasally mimicked the alarm in Wily's lair. (6)

Despite himself, Hephaestus snorted in amusement.

"Wow..." Lan muttered to himself for the umpteenth time.

"Yeah," Megaman. exe agreed. "That was... a lot easier than I remember it being..."

"You know..." Lan began musing as more of those weird deja-vu dreams came back to him. "There's those rumors of a navi having stolen the LifeAura data. You think we could take him?" (7)

Megaman. exe thought for a moment and imaged of a black and gold navi in a brown cloak came to him. Images of how the strange NetNavi moved, fought, and a name... Bass. exe. "You know, I think we could!"

"Ooo..." Apollo winced as he watched the action. "That's gonna leave a mark."

"Indeed," Hephaestus agreed. "He is a very powerful and skilled combatant."

"Lan, gimme something to work with here!" the strange blue NetNavi yelled in desperation as he did his best to dodge the Air Bursts being fired at him repeatedly. Why this foolish NetNavi come to challenge him was of little consequence. There were always challengers after him. Navis and NetOps who thought they were more than pathetic cannon fodder to one such as him. Though this one was proving surprisingly resilient. Most navis would have been deleted already from the hits this one had taken in their fight.

"Coming atcha!" the NetOp's voice yelled. "Program Advance! Omega Cannon 3!"

The repeated cannon blasts came slow to his eyes, and were easy to avoid. The ones he had to that is. Well, most of them...

The blue navi gulped and said something to his NetOp that was of little concern. A call for retreat if the fact that he jacked out shortly after was any indication. But he let the navi go in favor of fingering a new tatter in his cloak.

"Interesting..." the dark figure grinned. "Not many can do even this much to me... You have potential little blue navi..."

Oh, yes... He'd let the navi go. Let him run and grow stronger so he could return and present a proper challenge. He had so few worthy challengers as it was…

Lan groaned as he lay in his room. It had been almost a month since he and Megaman. exe had gotten their collective butts kicked by that strange dark navi... Bass. exe...

And those weird dreams hadn't stopped. If anything, they were getting clearer. The latest ones were about some red virus navi named–

"Lan!" Megaman. exe protested. "If you have time to lay around, you have time to do your homework!"

"I can't help it!" Lan moaned. "Those dreams about that viral navi have been eating at me. I mean, he didn't ask to be made as a dangerous virus! He could have been a great friend, but Chaud and Protoman wouldn't listen! If... if only we'd found that sauce file we could have saved him..."

"A saucy file?" Apollo quirked an eyebrow. "The mighty Apollo thinks you two are a little young to be hanging around those parts of the net."

"Hush, I'm trying to work here," Hephaestus hissed at the sun god.

"Don't worry," Apollo waved Hephaestus off, "the Mighty Apollo already sent the location of the coveted data to them in their dreams."

Hephaestus blinked. "How...? Right..." the forge god pinched the bridge of his nose. "Prophecy is one of your domains."

"Source file, Lan," Megaman. exe rolled his eyes from the PET. He understood Lan's concern, and shared it to a great extent. But moping about events that never happened wasn't getting anything done. "Which you would know if you did your homework!"

The PET chose that moment to beep with a news alert.

"Mail News:" Megaman. exe read. "Damage by the new type of virus known as the 'Zero Virus' is spreading. The Zero Virus infects Navis instead of electronic devices, and adversely affects their functions. No effective vaccine is available yet, so the only possible response to an infection is to turn off your PET."

Navi and NetOp were silent for several moments as Lan read his other e-mails.

"Lan..." Megaman. exe spoke up as the fact that current events matched their latest dreams sunk in. "You don't think...?"

"Only one way to find out," Lan declared and prepared to jack his navi into the net.

Lan smiled to himself as he guided Megaman. exe towards the link to the Zero Account. Now that they had the link code that Starman. exe had guarded, it was smooth sailing. With one short necessary detour...

"Huh?" a program asked as they moved to enter a tunnel area. "Why are you headed down there? That's the 'Data Graveyard'... nothing down there but trash data about to be processed..."

"Friend of ours left something down there," Megaman. exe smiled as he dropped down.

A few minutes of searching, blasting a few stray viruses, and they found it. (8)

"My, what an interesting smell you've discovered," Apollo tried to do an impression of the two being observed. It was somewhat ruined by the fact that he was trying to keep from chuckling.

Hephaestus just sighed. It was so easy to forget that Apollo was one of the ones who helped write the precognitive simulation protocols that they all used to predict potential Loop scenarios.

"Here it is..." Megaman. exe whispered in awe as he gathered the mystery data crystal and analyzed it, "right where our dreams said it would be..."

"Yeah..." Lan breathed in reply. "Could it be that... we're not dreaming Megaman? Maybe... maybe we're... remembering?"

"Things that haven't happened yet?" the navi quirked an eyebrow. "That's crazy. If something hasn't happened, you can't remember it."

Both of them could tell that despite the navi's assured tone, he was wondering the same thing Lan was.

"Anyway, we should send this to dad so he can get to work on it," Lan broke the silence.

"Right," Megaman. exe nodded as he began the transmission process.

"Honeys and gentledudes!" Apollo proclaimed as the Anchor and co-Anchor candidate faced off against the sapient mortal virus. "The bout you've all been waiting for! EXE versus Zero! Fight!"

Hephaestus just watched as the two clashed. The redemption of Zero. exe may not have been necessary for the successful completion of baseline events, but... but over the long course of getting this branch to the point of even cursory looping stability and watching his assigned Anchors (9) struggle he'd come to appreciate their attitude all the more. Stand tall in the face of adversity. Never back down from the oppressors. And redeem everyone you could.

It wasn't necessary, no, but he wanted them to have this victory nonetheless.

"Your power is beyond specifications," the viral navi Zero. exe praised his opponents. The battle had been close, but the loss was his. Perhaps as it should be. "So this is the force that beat the WWW! What is it... the power of friendship? Friendship... It's a feeling I've never experienced before, but I think I understand the strength it brings... Well, you beat me. Go ahead, kill me." (10)

"No," Megaman. exe refused.

"Yeah," Lan agreed. "Look, you didn't choose to be a virus. To be something everyone views as inherently evil. And... we can tell. You aren't evil."

Megaman. exe picked up as his NetOp trailed off. "You've become something more than a virus and you don't have to live that way anymore if you don't want to. Come with us," he held out his hand. "Let us help you."

Megaman. exe suddenly turned and formed one arm into a sword as he blocked a blade strike aimed for Zero. exe by another red navi.

"Don't be a fool, Megaman!" Protoman. exe yelled as he tried to force his way past the blue navi and attack Zero. exe.

"Protoman?!" Lan yelled. "What are you doing?!"

"Lan, think rationally!" the voice of Chaud sounded from Protoman. exe's link. "This is a heinous, evolving virus... If you don't finish it off, there's no telling how much damage it'll do!"

"You're wrong, Chaud!" Lan yelled back as the boys' two navis continued to struggle. One to delete the viral navi Zero. exe and the other to save him.

"Everyone, stop!" a new voice cut into the confrontation. The voice of Dr. Hikari. "There is no need to delete the Zero Virus!"

"Dr. Hikari...?" Chaud seemed extremely puzzled by this turn of events.

"Lan, Megaman," Dr. Hikari continued. "I analyzed the data you sent me, and if Zero is willing, I can 'seal in' the virus function. He'd fully become a NetNavi with no reason for anyone to delete him!"

"...I don't understand," Zero. exe seemed... lost. "Why do you want to do this for me?"

Chaud sighed heavily and ordered Protoman. exe to stand down. "Because that's just the way they are. I don't get it either..."

"Yeah, right!" Lan argued. "I bet you totally get it!"

"Whatever," Chaud brushed off the claim.

"Okay, Zero," Megaman. exe told the viral navi, "I'm about to open a link to SciLab's computer."

"I..." Zero. exe stared for several seconds. "Thank you. All of you. I–"

About then was the point where the net area shook and alarms started blaring.

"And Megaman leads with a right! A left! A cannon! But the reborn LifeVirus strikes back! But Megaman counters with a–" Apollo winced as the ZeroCounter Program Advance was unleashed, "ooooo, ouch!"

"Yeah, I don't think viruses were meant to bend that way," Hephaestus smirked.

"Friends? How strange... But, I think I can get used to it. ... Goodbye. Goodbye, my friends! I'll see you around!"

Lan and Megaman. exe breathed a sigh of relief as the parting words of Zero. exe echoed in their heads. Everything had come together in the end. Not only had Zero. exe been saved, but he'd been instrumental in capturing that Professor guy.

"Okay," Megaman. exe piped up. "Maybe... maybe we are remembering things that haven't happened yet. But, if that's true... what do we do about it?"

"Yeah," Lan replied heavily. "Is this random? Is there a reason we remember future events? What if we do the wrong thing? We gotta talk to someone about this... Someone smart, but..."

"But who won't stick us in a loony bin for claiming we can see the future," Megaman. exe agreed. (11) "Hmm... Do your memories have someone in them called Mr. Famous?"

"Yeah..." Lan recalled a somewhat eccentric man who was also a brilliant NetBattler that cycled through a series of incredibly strong custom navis. Ones that he seemed to design himself. "Why not?"

"Okay!" the license examiner navi explained. "'HeroData' and 'HopeData' are hidden on the net! Find them both and bring them here to get your ZLicense!"

Megaman. exe nodded absently as he took off searching. This was the easiest of the city NetBattler exams that he and Lan would apparently be taking as the upcoming invasion by the Gospel netmafia the two's weird dream/memories had enlightened them to. Lan was getting impatient about finding that 'Mr. Famous' fellow and using him as a sounding board for the whole weird situation.

'Personally,' Megaman. exe thought to himself as he recalled the way their mom had reacted upon seeing Lan's report card, *'I'd like to see Lan using that foreknowledge to improve his grades instead of surfing the net all the time...'*

"Hey!" Apollo shouted as he jumped up and struck a pose with his surfboard. "What's wrong with surfing? The mighty Apollo looks with favor upon those heroes who surf, regardless of where!"

"Okay, where in Tartarus were you hiding that thing?" Hephaestus eyed the surfboard Apollo was holding warily. The sun god hadn't had that when he came in. Come to think of it, there was suddenly a surplus of sand and a large beach umbrella in his office too...

"So glad you asked, dear brother!" the eternal bachelor and hobby beach bum grinned and held up a container the size of a lunchbox. "The mighty Apollo's instant beach kit! Fun in the sun for everyone!"

Hephaestus facepalmed once again. "We're indoors you idiot..."

Behind his sunglasses, the sun god stared back blankly. "...So?"

Things had gone swimmingly so far up to now. The gas problem at Yai's house while she'd been bathing had been dealt with, and Airman. exe had been deleted rather handily.

"No," Hephaestus declared before Apollo said a word.

"Huh...?" the sun god blinked owlishly from where he'd been about to perform a guitar riff. On an actual guitar.

"No you are not singing 'They Can Delete Airman' again," the forge god clarified.

"...Not even a little bit?"

"NO."

Of course Yai had to get on their case about seeing her naked despite Mayl being the one who pulled her out of the bath, which Lan honestly felt was rather creepy. (12) Yeah, Yai was the same age as Lan and the rest of his friends, but she looked a fair bit younger...

In any case, he'd gotten the BLicense yesterday no problem and today they had everyone together to go camping. Even Chaud seemed on board, even if it would just end up his cover for official work. He just had to make sure he was on his game when trouble started...

Hephaestus just tried to ignore Apollo as he strummed music from that mortal movie 'The Quick and the Dead'. It wasn't that easy given how well the music was meshing with the current events.

Chaud sat in his office and thought on the events at the Okuden Valley campgrounds. He supposed that being with others his own age had been... fun... for what little time he'd spent with them before getting to work. (13) But what had really intrigued him was Lan and his navi Megaman. exe...

The two had wandered off on the way to the campgrounds, only to come back right after the others had been stopped by a swarm of bees with precisely the right materials to make a torch and repel the insects. Then he'd stepped off the path and grabbed some binoculars another camper had lost which was just what was needed to see that the bear in their path was in fact an automaton with a jack-in port, which the two then entered and took care of the virus in its systems.

But the cherry on this prescient cake was what had happened when Chaud had sent Lan an e-mail regarding the four remote detonators on the bomb attached to the valley's hydroelectric dam. Apparently... Lan had already found and disabled three of them by the time Chaud had sent the e-mail. And then, right after Chaud had deduced that the bomber would be holding the last detonator, the two had found him and challenged him. They'd even, with no way of knowing that Quickman. exe was himself a deadnavi detonation switch (14), kept him occupied long enough for Chaud and Protoman. exe to disable the bomb itself.

It was all so utterly improbable that Chaud might have suspected the two of being in cahoots with the bomber. Except that the very thought of the two naively good-natured NetBattlers being willing accomplices of a criminal organization was so thoroughly at odds with reality that no sane man could take it seriously. But still... there was no other reasonable explanation he could see, except...

The previous times with the WWW, Lan and Megaman. exe had always seemed to be in the right place at the right time... They'd seemed confused enough by events, despite their continual willingness to wade into danger and help rather than running, that Chaud and Protoman. exe were willing to chalk it up to coincidence. But now... with how they'd seemed almost clairvoyant regarding recent events? He couldn't help but wonder.

"Maybe Lan and Megaman are favored by the kami?" he allowed himself to muse aloud. The thought sounded so ludicrous when spoken that he couldn't help but snort in amusement.

"Aw, bro, we love you guys too," Apollo smiled at the words of the mortal champion. "You just need to lighten up a bit!"

Hephaestus kept his agreement to himself. The last thing Apollo needed was encouragement.

Mr. Famous considered the kid and his navi who'd just utterly trounced Gateman. exe. Now that he thought to take a better look at the kid, he realized that this was no ordinary city NetBattler looking to upgrade his license. No, this was the Hikari boy who'd defeated WWW not once, but twice. Maybe handicapping Gateman. exe for the boy and his navi *hadn't* been necessary...

"Not bad, kid..." he allowed, musing on the skills shown. Yes, he'd definitely allowed his long winning streak to make him a bit cocky. "Not bad at all. Looks like I need to step up my game before you come back for a rematch!"

"Heh..." the Hikari boy rubbed his head in flattered embarrassment. "Actually, Mr. Famous? My friends and I were talking about some hypothalamus scenarios–"

"Hypothetical, Lan," the navi, Megaman. exe, corrected with an exasperated sigh.

"Yeah, that..." the Hikari boy agreed absently before continuing, "and I was wondering if you might have any thoughts..."

Mr. Famous considered for a moment, before shrugging. The kid had more-or-less saved the world a couple of times already, so he supposed hearing out some weird scenarios kids came up with was the least he could do. "Sure, why not? Let's grab a couple of stools."

The two sat down and the Hikari boy began in earnest. "Well, the one that has me thinking the most is... if you went back in time and got to do events over again... and ultimately things turned out pretty

well the first time around... would it still be right to try and change things for the better? How much before you risk things not going as well? And..." there the boy kind of trailed off.

Mr. Famous felt his eyebrow raise up from behind his shades. Despite the impossibility of the scenario, the morality of the question was still rather mature for a boy his age. (15) "Well..." he pondered for a moment, giving the question consideration due its serious delivery. "The most important thing one would possess in such a situation would be foreknowledge. Knowing what will happen before it does is a powerful thing, and you are right in thinking that it isn't one to take lightly. Good or bad, all choices have consequences, and the more you change regarding foreknowledge, the less reliable that foreknowledge becomes. So the options are clear, either do everything the same so that your foreknowledge remains accurate, or change things knowing that each change makes that foreknowledge less certain. One you know leads to a positive outcome, but the other leads somewhere uncertain. Perhaps better, perhaps worse. But there is something else to consider..."

"What?" the boy asked, clearly intrigued, and Mr. Famous smiled.

"The fact that we, humans and navis, are predisposed to using all tools at our disposal in challenging times," he explained. "To possess foreknowledge is to be driven to act upon it to some extent, for in life there is no such thing as a completely passive observer. Knowledge influences choices, which in turn affect consequences, which become the chain of events we call 'life'. No matter how subtle, foreknowledge will change how a person reacts to events. And trying too hard to change nothing may result in the most disastrous changes of all. Even if you don't know where it will take you, so long as you work towards a better future for the world with all your heart, then I believe that is where we will end up." (16)

"Wow..." boy and navi declared together.

"In short," Mr. Famous smiled, "don't sweat it. Just do the best you know how and trust that the world can handle the rest."

"Yeah, you know his name is Famous, Famous! Oh oh oh oh!"

Hephaestus smiled and did his best to ignore Apollo's singing. The mortal's words were not only wise, but remarkably appropriate advice for a new looper. There would be stumbling points, sure, but that was how all mortals learned in the end.

Lan groaned as he got back to his home country. After getting the Style Change system, complete with HeatGuts style right off the bat, and beating Shadowman. exe rather handily, the trip to Netopia had been some kind of weird train wreck of events. First he'd gotten pickpocketed at the airport while trying to spot Chaud and get Megaman. exe back. Then when he'd tried to refuse the car ride in favor of taking the bus, the 'creepy samaritan' had all but thrown him in and stolen his BattleChips anyway. Then he and Megaman. exe had gotten in a fight over how terrible the trip was going, including fighting about whose recollection of their fight in the original series of events was correct, and he'd stormed out of the hotel room, leaving his navi behind.

He hadn't remembered about the passport theft until talking with Higsby and had run back in time to run into the thief and tried to chase him down the alley. Looking back, Lan wasn't sure catching up to the guy was the best plan of action, but at least he got to meet Raoul again when the guy came to his rescue with Thunderman. exe getting his passport back. A quick side-trip to meet Miss Millions and fight Snakeman. exe had gotten his BattleChips back (were they seriously worth 500000 zenny?), but the hits hadn't stopped there...

The meeting of the official NetBattlers, including Raoul from the day before, had ignored his warnings that something felt 'off' and thus everyone was dumped into a secret area underneath Net Castle. Well, Lan had avoided the trapdoor, but then decided to jump anyway. Not his brightest idea, even considering that he knew where all the traps were and how to disable them quickly. Even knowing that Princess Pride was the mole hadn't helped when Chaud

concluded that he and Megaman. exe were the spy from Gospel upon walking in on them and an injured Raoul and tried to arrest them. The only good news was that Lan managed to draw the battle out long enough for Raoul to recover and tell Chaud the truth so they could stop Princess Pride and Knightman. exe together. He hadn't even been able to stop the princess from falling through the final trap and being hospitalized...

Oh, but it wasn't over yet... Maybe if he'd been less worn out, he could have headed off what happened next. After getting some souvenirs and getting on the plane, the damn poisonous spider someone had the brilliant idea to bring on board had gotten loose and he'd nearly got bitten capturing it again. Then Mr. Gauss and Magnetman. exe had sabotaged the plane to get some program on board and nearly crashed the plane. And to top everything off, there was that SLicense exam waiting for him...

Honestly, right now he just wanted to give the souvenirs to his friends, crawl into bed, and sleep for a week… (17)

"Oh, no you don't!" Hephaestus yelled as he physically restrained Apollo from the terminal while Lan was giving Mayl her gift.

"But he's giving her a ring!" Apollo protested. "A *ring* ! The mighty Apollo decrees that he should at least get a sweet date out of the deal, not some crummy chip!" (18)

Whatever power was governing the acquisition of style changes, Lan wasn't amused by it. To start off, the new style change he'd gotten the morning after the hijacking incident had been WoodShield style. Which would have been great if he'd gotten it in time to use against Magnetman. exe. Instead he'd gotten it just in time to run into Mr. Match and his new navi Heatman. exe.

Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful.

And of course after that, he'd gone looking for Roll. exe who'd gotten lost during the earthquake earlier that morning and found the entire net covered in ice. Some investigation, a few city NetBattler jobs, rescuing Roll. exe, running around to various sources for various programs to break through the ice on the net, and a relatively quick fight with Freezeman. exe later and they had earned the ElecTeam style. Right after its elemental powers would have been most useful.

The following week of relative quiet before Gospel's final move saw them earning the AquaCustom style in between Megaman. exe's nagging of Lan to take that time to do his homework.

"...What?" Hephaestus asked curiously. "No comment about how homework's a bummer?"

"Oh, it is," Apollo admitted. "But the mighty Apollo must agree that flunking is worse." (19)

"Hey there!"

"..."

"I'm Lan, what's your name?"

"..."

Lan knew it was him. Underneath that disguise, the leader of Gospel was that silent kid from the plane. Sean... Obi-something. He'd gotten the idea to try and head off Gospel's plans by making friends with their secret leader, but... Well, the boy hadn't really cooperated.

Then there was the whole warping of the real world and cyberworld together thing which had bugged Lan all the way through the building's network and up to the confrontation with the copies of his friends' navis. He didn't recall making the connection before, but...

was it possible Gospel's set-up was a prototype of what Dr. Regal would eventually create?

In any case, it didn't matter at the moment. What mattered was putting a stop to Sean before he did permanent damage to anything. And to do that, they had to go through his fake Bass. exe created from bug fusion.

"Now, Bass!" Sean declared with his disguised voice. "Begin Project 'World Domination!' You can start...by deleting the Navi in front of you!

"...Gladly!" the false navi said in an odd tone. "...Battle is my forte!"

"Yeah, right!" Lan declared dramatically despite his lightheadedness from the excess radiation his MagSuit couldn't absorb. "Ready, Megaman? Battle routine, set!"

"Execute!"

"Foolish evil navi!" Apollo posed dramatically. "You cannot stand against the mighty Megaman! Not when he possesses the almighty Program Advance: Gater! Watch as he summons the avatar of the mighty Gateman and blasts you with..."

Apollo paused and blinked as he actually saw what said navi avatar was unleashing from his chest gate.

"...everything but the kitchen sink?" (20)

"Hey, you use what works," Hephaestus grinned.

As the rest of the room was recovering from the shock that Gospel's leader was a kid, including Sean himself recovering from the shock of losing his cybersuit disguise, Lan and Megaman. exe were forging ahead.

Unfortunately, Sean was faster and boosted the server's power, which also caused the radiation levels to skyrocket. Lan had a hard time convincing his friends to retreat, but he managed it with a promise to come back alive. An extra-serious one in Mayl's case that he'd blush over were the world not at stake.

Which left just him and Sean. Who was refusing to back down, no matter the cost to himself or the world. He kept jacking the power up ever higher, until Lan was having trouble moving. Which was about when the false Bass began to cry out in pain as his body twisted in unnatural ways, eventually becoming the Gospel bug beast Lan and Megaman. exe remembered from the other timeline.

"Lan! Megaman! Do you read me?" the voice of their father sounded from an urgent message.

"Hey, dad," Lan said more calmly than he probably had any right to. "Is this about how using bug fusion to create a 'SuperNavi' actually results in an out of control bugged-out monstrosity?"

"Well... yes," Dr. Hikari sounded surprised. "But how...?"

"We're kind of looking at it right now..."

"What?! Lan, you have to delete it immediately!"

"Getting right on that, dad."

"What's... what's going on?" Sean began panicking from his controls as the energy readings began skyrocketing. "I... I can't control it!"

Unfortunately, this was about when Lan passed out.

"Okay, the mighty Apollo has to admit, this is a sweet dreamscape viewer you have."

"Thanks," Hephaestus smiled as he watched the spirit forms of the two brothers interact and bring Lan back to consciousness. "I traded favors with Morpheus to upgrade it."

"Heh... I blacked out again... I'm sorry, Hub..."

"I'm the one who should be apologizing, Lan! We should have said something to dad or someone else to get the MagSuit rated for higher radiation levels! But you still have to try, Lan! If I was your brother Hub... But I'm not..."

"No... It doesn't matter if you're a navi... or a human... You are... and you always have been... my brother... Hub... And... It's high time I started acting like it... We fight... together..."

"Lan... Okay... I've begun synching my heart program with you... I didn't want to do this, but..."

"It's okay... Hub... The synchro... it feels right... Always did..."

"Okay, Lan... It's done..."

"Then it's time to set Gospel's bug beast straight!"

"Lan..." Hub cried out as the synchronization of the heart program finished. "I feel... I think it's another style change!" A flash of light engulfed the navi and when it dies down he looked much the same, only glowing with power. "Is this...? It's like all style changes in one... Created by our bond..."

"Heh..." Lan chuckled weakly. "Obviously it's Hub Style then..."

"That's..." Sean whispered from where he was finally succumbing to the radiation, "not possible..."

"Let's do this, bro! Battle routine, set!"

"Execute!"

On the warped network, the Gospel bug beast roared as Lan and Hub opened with the Double Hero Program Advance and went to town.

"You know, it occurs to the mighty Apollo that radiation is supposed to be dangerous to mortals... How do they live through this every time again?"

"It depends on the type of radiation," Hephaestus explained calmly as Lan and his former adversary were taken to the hospital. "Some can be painfully lethal to mortals with enough exposure, but the kind generated by electronics is only harmful to humans during direct high level exposure. It's relatively simple to recover from with proper rest and relaxation." (21)

Lan was enjoying himself. A couple days in the hospital for observation before he was released with orders to rest, relax, and get fresh air. Which basically meant an excuse to go camping with everyone again. And, partly thanks to Hub's nagging, and partly due to their being not much else to do in the hospital, he actually had his homework done.

Still... Dad had confirmed what he remembered about someone manipulating Sean. Obviously Lord Wily was partly behind it, but... was he the only one?

And of course there were those rumors they'd heard of things that sounded like Bass. exe clones being sighted and being deleted by an identical navi that was probably the real deal.

'Hub Style...' Lan thought to himself. *'Maybe... maybe it's time for a rematch...'*

"Bad idea, you two," Hephaestus winced, "bad idea..."

"Don't worry, brother!" Apollo grinned brightly. "They won't die!"

"You think they can win?"

"Now, now, the mighty Apollo didn't say *that* ..."

"So, it's you again," Bass. exe grinned as he recognized the navi before him. "Time to see if you've become worthy opponents! Time to learn the true joy that is battle!"

"Ready, Hub?" the operator asked.

"Ready!" the navi declared. "Style change! Hub Style!"

"Intriguing..." Bass. exe mused behind his aura. "Let's see what new power you have gained since last time!"

The navi, Megaman. exe, opened fire with a blast that actually blew his aura away and began peppering him with buster shots that the solo navi ignored as he opened fire himself. His opponent formed a shield that blocked his shots and summoned a pink navi avatar to attack him. Bass. exe scoffed and turned to deal with the nuisance, only to realize it was a distraction a little too late as he heard a program advance being called out.

"LifeSword3!" the yell came as his opponent slashed.

Bass. exe felt himself grunt from the slash, but in the next moment he made a dash and managed to grab the navi before he could disengage. He then began gathering power in his free arm as it formed back into a buster. "Not bad!" he complimented as he prepared to unleash the blast point-blank. "But not good enough!"

The burst threw his opponent into the ground harshly, and he was rewarded with a cry of pain. But as he moved to advance on his downed opponent, he winced as pain shot through him. It seemed that last attack had actually hurt him...

"You've improved," he declared as he stood over the downed navi. "This is quite the power you've gained... Hub Style did you call it? I like it... I think I'll take it..." Bass. exe continued grinning as he bent over to grab the navi and activated his ultimate program. "GetAbility: HubStyle!" (22)

"Gaaahh!" the navi cried out as its data was copied.

"Heh," Bass. exe released him as the transfer was completed and considered the navi. It hadn't been all that long since their last battle, and he'd grown this much? "Not bad... Next time I might actually have to take you seriously. We shall meet again, my worthy opponent..."

And with an appropriately dramatic swirl of his cloak, he vanished.

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1) You know, the stuff Zeus likes to use on any lady who plays 'hard to get' (with an unrealistically wide definition of 'hard to get').

2) The ambrosia hat (the divine equivalent of a beer hat) on his head rather ruined the effect.

3) Wait until he finds out that's considered rather mundane in some corners of the multiverse.

4) Yes. Yes he is. This is feeling more and more like MST3K.

5) The latter two lines by burningclaw2.

6) It's a surprisingly standard evil lair design in many universes.

7) Ahahahahahahaha...no.

8) What they found it *in* is best left undiscussed.

9) *All* of his assigned Anchors.

10) Zero. exe was something of a defeatist before Lan and Hub happened to him.

11) A reasonable concern given their situation.

12) It's definitely one of the story events I found a little creepy when I played. It's not helped by the way she shifts her anger to flirty teasing when she finds out she was mistaken.

13) Chaud and friendly socialization really don't seem to be on speaking terms much of the time.

14) He dies, it triggers the device. Just in case you weren't familiar with the adjusted term.

15) A heck of a lot more mature than the Original Seven (Ranma Saotome, Shinji Ikari, Usagi Tsukino, Ichigo Kurosaki, Lina Inverse, and Harry Potter) were about things in the early days (Innortal's era) of the Loops.

16) *Hides his soapbox* I have no idea what you're talking about.

17) Lan's terrible horrible no good very bad vacation.

18) He couldn't make them go out with each other, but he probably could send subconscious impulses that would lead to something being blurted out inconveniently. In other words: Admins can't subvert a mortal's Free Will, but they can give a mortal a bad case of 'foot in mouth' disease.

19) Obligatory 'stay in school' message done.

20) I find Gater to be a fun program advance. If only because I like watching the torrent of odds and ends come out and trying to see how many I can identify for the instant they're on screen.

21) Or just chalk it up to fictional physics and plot armor. Whatever works.

22) Yeah, I know that it only happens in the manga, but Bass. exe's GetAbility should still be able to do this from what I understand about it.

Battle in the Network: With Style

Battle in the Network: With Style

Lan smiled as the DNN producer, Noboru Sunayama, pitched the N1 Grand Prix to his friends. While he knew the guy was a WWW member, he didn't have any proof at the moment to expose him. And besides, he recalled the N1 Grand Prix being a lot of fun and he knew how to get the guy to incriminate himself later.

As it was, Lan and Hub had been practicing with their style changes and unlike last time they were *more* than prepared for their upcoming opponents...

As talented as Apollo was at music, his current rendition of 'Two Futures' was rather distracting at the moment.

"Will you please stop singing those songs out loud!" screamed Hephaestus.

"You're just jealous that I can sing songs from your loop better than you can," Apollo stated with a smug look on his face.

"What did I do to deserve this?!" Hephaestus exclaimed as he slammed his head on his desk. (1)

"Flashman!" cried the Blue Bomber. "Release my friends from their hypnosis!"

The WWW Navi sneered... somehow (2). "Now why would I do that? It doesn't serve me any purpose to do so."

Megaman shrugged. "Suit yourself. Just was giving you a heads up before I pummel you."

The elec-themed navi proceeded to affect a haughty attitude. "HAH! I'd like to see you try!"

The Blue Navi affixed a smirk. "Okay, but you asked for it. Lan!" he called out to his NetOp.

Back outside, in the Principal's Office, Lan nodded. "Roger! Initiating Style Change!"

Flashman started. "Wait, Style Change?!"

Rings of code formed around Megaman, rotating around him vertically. As they passed over him, the blue on his armor turned green and the splash of white under his Navi Mark extended up to his left shoulder, where a green pauldron attached. A simple yellow Shield with a green rim materialized on his right arm, as the Red on his Navi Mark flickered to green.

"Style Change: WoodShield Style!" he announced, completing the transformation by closing his now-armored mouthguard.

Flashman was taken off-guard, but recovered his bluster. "If you think changing into a Wood Style is enough to take me on, you've got another thing coming! Neon Light!" he declared, shooting off an orb of light that randomly zig-zagged towards Megaman.

Lan just shook his head. "You'd think they'd learn by now not to tempt fate. WoodAura, BattleChip In!"

As the wood-attribute aura snapped into place, Hub couldn't help but comment, "I wouldn't talk if I were you, Lan. Didn't you say you'd ace that history test last week?"

The Hikari boy in the Real World grumbled, "I swear those questions were different than they were last time..."

Meanwhile, Flashman was panicking. "Rei! Please tell me you have any Fire Chips!"

Rei Saiko, Flashman's NetOp was seething. "I can't send you Chips! I'm still transmitting the Tetra-Code! And even if I could, we don't have strong enough Chips to break that Aura!"

Hub was watching this almost sadly. "I kind of feel almost sorry for him now," he commented.

Lan shrugged. "It's his own fault for underestimating us," he pointed out.

Megaman considered this, while charging up his MegaBuster. "I guess that's true," he said as he released the Tornado Buster at the panicking Flashman, not only sending him flying but also dealing double damage per hit.

Lan grinned as he took out a few Chips. "How about we finish this off with a blast!"

Hub also grinned. "I think I know what you have in mind. Ready!"

Lan slotted in his selected Chips. "Shotgun, CrossGun, Spreader, Mega Cannon; In and Download!"

"Program Advance: Powered Cannon!" declared Megaman, as the truly enormous Cannon formed on his arm.

Flashman took one look at it, and would have wet himself if he could. As it was, he only said one thing... "I REGRET NOTHING!" he screamed, as the Cannon Blast deleted him.

Rei gritted his teeth, before spitting, "Curse you, Hikari! You may have deleted Flashman, but I've already transmitted the Tetra-Code! Next time, things will be different!"

Lan smirked. "Bring it on! We'll take you down even harder!"

"Wow... a..." the delinquent client of Higsby's stammered nervously, "a Style Change... huh..."

Hub, currently in ElecTeam Style since he felt like showing off, managed to suppress the chuckle at the navi's inadvertent imitation of the rare chip fanatic as he gave the navi a condescending look. "Honestly, you're lucky Higsby and Numberman didn't come after you themselves."

"Pffft!" the HeelNavi scoffed. "What could those two possibly do?"

"You ever hear of the WWW?" Hub asked calmly.

"Um... yeah... why?" the navi asked nervously.

"How easy do you think it is to walk away from a group like that?"

"Yeah, right!" the HeelNavi laughed. "Everyone knows when you're in a group like that, the only way you leave is in a coffin!"

"Well, Higsby and Numberman?" Hub stared the navi right in the eye. "They walked away. And they're still alive."

"B-b-b-b-but..." the HeelNavi suddenly looked very nervous at the implications, "th-th-that's... how?"

"Because the great Higsby's hair is *that awesome* !" Apollo yelled. (3)

'What the blub is going on?!' Bubbleman. exe thought frantically to himself as he continued running. First, Megaman. exe had failed to fall for his brilliant 'look out behind you' gambit and started opening fire instead. Then the narrow paths of Yoko had failed to even slow him down, not to mention the fact that when he'd summoned his Bubble Brigade, they'd yelled something about 'the crimson ninja' (despite Megaman. exe *clearly* being blue) and 'please don't hurt us again' before simply giving the 'needle' program that could burst his

Bubble Door to his pursuer and hightailing it. *'Megaman is blubbing straight through all of my blu-brilliant stalling tactics! If this keeps up even my blubbly bubbles won't* –WHAT THE BLUB?! HOW DID YOU BLUBBING GET IN FRONT OF ME?!"

"Trade secret," the enemy of WWW smiled as he aimed his buster at Bubbleman. exe's face. (4)

"I'm sorry, Protoman..." Chaud grit his teeth as the newly revealed WWW operative Sunayama issued his ultimatum. To secure the release of his father; the president of IPC inc., the man who was never around for him when he needed it; he had to surrender his PET, the navi he'd customized himself, his only real friend... Protoman. exe...

"Viewers around the world watching through the hidden cameras!" Sunayama boasted. "Observe Electopia's ace NetBattler surrender to the WWW. Chaud is now hand..."

"Megaman, ATTACK!" a familiar voice yelled out right before a blue PET beaned Sunayama upside the head, knocking him out. (5)

"Did that seriously just happen?!" Apollo roared with laughter. "That's *gold!* "

Hephaestus found himself chortling with amusement as the sun god continued guffawing at the sight while Lan and Chaud untied the latter's father before their opponent recovered.

"What in the world did this amazing kid do in the baseline?" Apollo finally asked when he could breathe again. About the time when Hub was dueling Desertman. exe to cover the escape of Chaud and his father.

"Pretty much the same thing, only a few moments later."

"Oh, the mighty Apollo *likes* this kid!"

Lan was doing his best to keep his knowledge of Mamoru to himself as he, Hub, and the boy chatted away on the beach in front of the hospital. On the surface, the boy seemed friendly and almost hero-worshipful of NetBattlers like Lan and Hub, but Lan's 'future memories' revealed several additional things about him. For one, his mother was the owner of the Ura Inn, which also made Tamako, the NetOp of Metalman. exe, his aunt. For another, he had HBD, the same heart condition that claimed the life of Hub in his human incarnation back when he was an infant. More shockingly, he was the current administrator of the undernet, which had been created by his own father.

But what was taking all of his willpower not to blurt out was something that he didn't really recall from those 'future memories'. It wasn't too surprising as the thing was easy to miss if you didn't know what it meant. The thing in question... was the navi symbol on Mamoru's wheelchair.

A navi symbol even his 'future memories' had only ever seen on the 'king of the undernet'.

As he readily agreed to visit Mamoru in the future, Lan couldn't help but consider the supreme irony of Mamoru and his apparent NetNavi. A NetOp who was too weak to go out, and a navi who was too strong to come visit… (6)

'I swear Mamoru,' Lan promised himself, *'somehow, someway, I'll make it so the two of you can see each other!'*

"Ooooo..." Apollo whistled with dramatic ominisity. "The 'king of the undernet', eh? The mighty Apollo thinks this just got very interesting... What does this 'king' look like?"

"Here," Hephaestus stated as he called up a new view.

"Is..." Apollo blinked at the sight, "is this connection bad?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. That's just the local digital reality distortion."

"Distorted by what?"

"By that," Hephaestus nodded at the only figure in the area shown. "By this 'underking's' sheer strength."

"Sweet."

Getting an IceBall chip for Mamoru had been no trouble. Honestly, if it would help convince him to undergo the potentially life-saving surgery, Lan and Hub would have cheerfully stormed the undernet and hunted down a full set of LifeAura chips for the boy.

But they'd gotten the chip and, with some purposefully vague talk about what happened to Hub when he'd been human, they'd talked him into getting the surgery. A few days later and the turn for the worse they'd been expecting happened, and they'd rushed right over. Rather than spend their time idle, they'd gone and gotten the program to convert fire chips to energy. And since they'd been collecting lots of fire chips for the past couple of days, they were more than ready for when Anetta and Plantman. exe would show up.

Plantman. exe had scoffed at the simpering fools that were Lan and Megaman. exe. He and Anetta were on a holy mission after all, and those two were worried about a single insignificant life. As if one sickly child could compare to the glory that Lord Wily and the WWW would usher in! He'd simply thrown one of the viruses he commanded at them and went on his way.

But instead of being halted by his cybervines, they'd just thrown fire chip after fire chip through an energy charger and liberally torched their way through his obstacles. How... how many fire chips did those two even have? And when they arrived... it was in a style change

form. But... not the WoodShield style that Rei and Flashman. exe had reported.

No, this one was red, sporting a huge fist, and quite *literally* burning with fury.

As he stared into the advancing fiery doom of HeatGuts style backed by no shortage of fire chips, the only comfort he could find was that his sacrifice would allow Anetta to get away with the TetraCode… (7)

"Well goodness gracious, great balls of fire!" Apollo declared as he saw Lan and Hub express their joint displeasure. "Somebody's having grilled vegetables later!"

"Thanks a lot, Lan! I have one more thing to do here, so I'll see you later!" Mr. Match smiled as the kid he'd tricked into helping him sabotage SciLab's computers skated for the elevator. He waited until his old foe was out of sight before turning to the computer. "Now then, time to begin. Heh heh heh heh!"

After the failure with Fireman. exe, he'd started over customizing a new navi. Unfortunately, Heatman. exe had fallen short on the test run against the two, so he'd tried again using experimental upgrades to make Flameman. exe. Sure some of them were questionable in source, and sure they'd rendered his latest navi little more than a raging beast mentally (8), but it was all worth it if they could take down Megaman. exe.

As for getting the kid to help the WWW's plans? That had just been too enticing to pass up!

"Dad, I need to tell you something. Mr. Match helped me out with those WWW navis earlier, but then he used that fact to guilt me into helping him install some data in some of SciLab's programs. But... whatever was in that data seemed like it was starting to hurt the

programs and... could you just check things out? If it's all legit, I'll apologize, but I'm still worried that something bad is going to happen..."

Dr. Hikari had thought the whole thing was odd. Mr. Match might have been a former WWW member, but like Higsby he was reformed. Still... he hadn't recalled the man being either authorized or asked to install new data so he'd gone to check the lab computers. As it turned out, he'd gotten there just as the temperature began to climb, and a quick check showed that there had been sabotaged data loaded onto the system that was making the temperature of all systems climb out of control. There wasn't any time to identify and correct the source, so he needed to retrieve and load the back-up data so he could reset the whole system. If SciLab went down... all of Electopia would be in danger!

"What are you doing!?" he yelled at his assistants when they refused to flee the danger.

"We're not leaving you," one man stated firmly as he took over a console.

"We're scientists too," a woman declared as she took her position. "We're all ready to give our lives to protect SciLab!"

"That is in *incredibly* poor taste," Hephaestus glowered as Apollo obliviously continued his rendition of 'Burning Down the House'.

Mr. Match did his best to project a bravado he wasn't really feeling. Megaman. exe had swept through the internet and doused (9) the fires Flameman. exe had set as if he'd had a bloody *map* . And to make matters worse, he was sporting yet *another* style change (Three style changes?! What the *hell* kind of navi program supported three style changes?!) the whole time. An *aqua* -based style that apparently made it easier to set up chip combos and program advances...

And he'd found their hiding place in the undernet like he'd been *guided* there...

"Light up, Flameman!" he ordered despite the circumstances. "Burn Megaman to ash!"

"Whraaaaaaah!"

"Dude!" Apollo waved his hand in front of his face like he smelled something bad. "Two words: Breath. Mint."

"How fascinating..." Bass. exe mused as he continued to watch the blue navi from before destroy his opponent. "It seems that you now emit the aura of the strong. Perhaps now is the time to test you once again?"

"Lan!" the blue navi exclaimed. "I sense it! *His* power!"

"So, he *is* here!" the NetOp's voice came through. "Hub, get ready!"

Bass. exe grinned to himself as he leisurely approached the navi. "You who emit the power of the strong, prepare yourself for battle!"

"I've found you, Bass!" a new voice yelled as another navi... one of those generic off-the-shelf peons... ran in. And yet... his voice sounded... familiar.

"How do you know my name, weakling?"

"Does the Alpha Rebellion ring any bells?

"Alpha Rebellion...!" Bass. exe's code flared at the name and his eyes narrowed. "You were sent from SciLab. So there is still a human after me."

"Bass! I am going to delete you! Indeed, I must delete you!"

"Navi slave to the humans. Do you think you can defeat me?"

"In order to fight you, I of course did not come unprepared. Gather to me, power of darkness! Haaaaaaaaaaa!" the navi raised his arms and Bass. exe felt a sinister power form around him. One that gave him momentary pause. "DarkAura! Bass! You don an aura yourself, so you must be aware... The defensive strength of this DarkAura... Far surpasses that of the LifeAura!"

"An aura of darkness. How impudent..."

"The power...!" the blue navi exclaimed. "It feels like he could survive even if the entire cyberworld was destroyed!"

"Hmm..." Bass. exe mused at the surprised look on the SciLab navi's face and began to gather power in his hand. "Interesting... I shall enjoy testing this theory... EarthBreaker!"

"Denied!" Apollo yelled as the attack failed to deal any damage.

"Indeed," Hephaestus noted from where he'd sent the subconscious suggestions to the ones that had intervened. Maybe Lan and Hub were ready to take on Bass. exe and maybe they weren't. But now wasn't the time for their battle to take place. As Wily called Bass. exe away and the interlopers retreated, he wondered if his newest Anchor and co-Anchor hopefuls would have agreed.

But then they immediately rushed off to check on the welfare of their father, proving that their desire to save lives was still stronger than their desire to prove themselves and letting Hephaestus know that he'd chosen wisely this time.

Lan wanted to hit himself as he lay in bed that night. Sure his dad and the scientists were all better than he remembered them being, but they had still been really hurt and the hospital insisted on

keeping them overnight for observation, so mom was staying there overnight too and...

Damnit, he'd been so *stupid!* He'd been all set to tell Mr. Match to take a hike and...

And the guy had gotten under his skin. *Again.* Planted that little seed of doubt. Made Lan wonder how accurate those 'future memories' really were. Made him wonder if Mr. Match really was trying to turn over a new leaf like he'd been pretending to...

"Why did I fall for it?!" he yelled to no one. "Why did I let myself think he'd changed?! WHY?!"

"LAN!" Hub's yell cut through the tirade as the boy looked to his navi and brother. "Lan..." Hub continued in a more subdued voice. "It's okay Lan... Dad's fine... and Mr. Match... he... he fooled me too, Lan..."

Lan just picked up his PET and hugged it to his chest. He couldn't give his brother a real hug, so this would have to do. (10)

"It's not wrong to want to believe the best of people, Lan," Hub's muffled voice still rang clear in Lan's ears.

Strangely, while he didn't feel any better, he didn't feel like such an idiot either.

"Do wake the mighty Apollo when the great Lan gets himself back together, would you?" the sun god said before leaning back and beginning to fake-snore.

Hephaestus just rolled his eyes and continued observing. The attempt was going rather smoothly all things considered. And... experience had taught him that something was bound to go wrong sooner or later. If this was the worst any of them had to deal with, he'd count that a miraculous victory.

"... Hey, Lan. Come back to school. Everyone's worried about you. They say you solved that WWW incident, you know! It's hard to celebrate without the hero in class!"

"What's wrong, Lan? Was it something we said?"

"I'm no hero..."

The words between himself and his friends echoed through Lan's head as he made his way to the room where his father was being kept for extended observation. Supposedly he'd been in the heat the longest and the doctors wanted to be sure there were no complications before releasing him.

The encounter with Chaud... had gone almost exactly as he remembered it though...

"I have not been informed about who exactly Alpha is. Only a select few Officials know that information. However, one thing is for certain. If Alpha is awakened, the net society will be annihilated."

"The Forbidden program. It can freeze Alpha. According to our sources, that program is in the undernet. It's reported that a navi named 'S' is in possession of it."

"Protoman and I are too well-know as Officials. The denizens of the undernet despise us. You, however..."

"Stop talking! If you tell me any more, I'll have to arrest you as an Official."

"Lan, go visit your father in the hospital. If you change your mind later, come to the Virus Lab at SciLab. About what you just told me...I never heard it. I owe you that much for what you did for me."

"'It'? What did he tell you to build?" Lan heard the voice of his dad as he entered the room.

"The ultimate navi..." the voice of Sean answered. The kid who was the former head of the Gospel netmafia that Lan and Hub had faced not too long ago and stopped from created a giant bug beast, "Bass. He said an ultimate navi was necessary in order to rule over all of Cyberworld."

Lan stopped and wanted to kick himself for being stupid again. He'd forgotten all about what Sean was out doing. Making amends for his crimes, while he was feeling sorry for himself. *Again.*

"Hey Lan!" Sean greeted.

"Looking good, Sean!" Lan smiled back. They exchanged a few friendly greetings before Sean left for SciLab. Lan wanted to follow him, but first... he owed his dad an explanation. Then he'd head over and accept the mission from Chaud.

Technically, he could start it before meeting Chaud, but he didn't have the BlackMind program yet and he should probably do this as officially as possible anyway.

"Ahrr!" Apollo growled hammily. "I be a scurvy scourge a' the undernet! Totally not a multi-time world savior! Ahrr!"

" *Please* tell me you won't be doing this the whole time..." Hephaestus facepalmed.

"There are ten navis ranked 1 to 10 in the undernet. Unranked navis cannot even meet the ranked ones. The navi called S, whom you will be seeking, appears to be a ranked navi."

Lan knew the drill. He did. Still, even knowing what was coming taking out ten navis in a row who were each a lot stronger than the generic WWW goons had been no walk in the park. But now he and Hub were facing down number 10 and ready to begin climbing up the ranking system.

"Who are you, you little punk...?" the cloaked navi growled. "A rank challenger? You think you can take my rank 10? Fine by me! Let's fight!"

"Sorry," Hub declared as he took a ready stance, "but we have to beat you in order to meet 'S'."

"...Why would a little punk like you be looking for S?" number 10's gaze sharpened. "If ya wanna find S, punk, you'll have to get past me first! I'll decide whether or not you deserve to meet S! Bring it on!"

"I'm bad, I'm bad! you know it!" Apollo belted out as Lan and Hub stood over the defeated number 10.

Hephaestus just tried to ignore the sun god as he continued to observe events, such as Lan and Hub receiving a fake distress call.

"And the whole world has to answer right now just to tell you once again, who's bad!"

"My rank. I'll give it to you," number 9 said, with a distinct tone of relief as he handed it over without a fight. Come to think of it, the former number 10 had sounded similar after they'd beaten him. "To be honest, I'm tired of this whole ranking system. I started out like everyone, battling my way to the top. But I've grown tired of fighting all the navis below me. They come to challenge me, day in and day out!"

Hub smirked as number 8 revealed himself to be Beastman. exe. WWW's beast-themed navi that had been sent to infiltrate the ranking system was clearly out for revenge. Good thing he had a nice little surprise for the speedy navi...

"Style change! AquaGround style!" Hub yelled as rings of code surrounded him and unveiled a blue-colored style with large boots. And as he stomped the ground, the surrounding terrain immediately switched to ice panels.

"Graaa–oop!" Beastman. exe yelled as he tried to charge, only for his claws to slip on the icy ground.

"Hahahahaha!" Lan chuckled as the animalistic navi swore loud and long while trying to keep his footing. "How do you like that, huh?"

"Just you wait you littl–ack!" Beastman. exe slipped again. "When I get my claws on you...!"

"Ice, ice, baby!" Apollo strummed out as Lan and Hub proceeded to beat their opponent even more soundly than before.

"That's cold," Hephaestus retorted, before blinking and groaning as he realized what he'd said. "Great, now you've got me doing it..."

"How well you managed to get here... I'm ranked 7," the cloaked navi stated. "Those who are ranked are duty-bound to take any challenge... You may have made it this far, but success is more than power. Real strength is driven by intelligence. So. Let me now offer you a quest... If you can find what I ask, you will get my rank as well..."

"All right! Let's have it!" Lan declared before Hub could speak.

"You are a forceful operator... Prepare to receive your quest. 'One of many birds'. Go now, and find it..."

"Oh, you mean like the one Lan made for our friend at the hospital?" Hub asked as Lan held up the origami crane and adjusted the PET's camera so the ranked navi could see it.

"Why... yes..." number 7 seemed rather shocked that they had it on hand. "Very well... I will award you the 7th rank..."

Hub blinked as Gutsman. exe appeared just in time to stop the boulder that numbers 6-4 had thrown at him. With everything that had been going on, he and Lan had practically forgotten that Dex had moved all the way to Netopia to live with his father and younger brother Chisao (11). He continued to blink owlishly as Dex admonished them for being sloppy and Gutsman. exe took out the three attackers with one big attack.

"Gutsman!" Hub finally found his voice. "Thanks! You saved me!"

"Heh!" the big navi chuckled lightly. "Helpin' friends is what friendship is all about! Yee-haw!" (12)

"But..." Lan spoke up, "what are you doing here, anyway?"

"I heard from Mayl that you were feeling down. So I came to cheer you up!"

"You came all the way from Netopia just to check on us?" Lan blinked as he recalled that was what had set off this chain of events. What... what would have happened if they hadn't been down enough for Mayl to call Dex in? Would someone else have saved them, or...?

"Of course! If any of my friends are in trouble, I'll help! Even if I'm on the opposite side of the world! That's what Dex is all about!"

"Aw, Dex... Thanks..."

"Lan, let's jack out. We've got lots to talk about. Gutsman! Jack out!"

Gutsman. exe vanished at that point, only to seemingly jack right back in a moment later. Just as Lan and Hub had been expecting.

"What is it, Guts..." Hub began reflexively before the differences in posture and the 'future memories' he and Lan shared reminded him what was really going on. "Hey! You're not Gutsman! Who are you!?"

"Hub! Those navis mentioned a Copyman when Gutsman beat them," Lan spoke up, knowing what was going on as well.

"Heh heh heh... You two are pretty sharp," Copyman. exe chuckled. "Ranked number 3, I am indeed Copyman! I can copy the data of any navi I see, and make it my own!"

"Which means those navis Gutsman beat were probably numbers 6, 5, and 4... Who work for you to ambush up and coming challengers..."

"Exactly! Kid, the word on the circuit is you're looking for S. What is it you're after? The Forbidden Program?"

"You know S?"

"I might," Copyman. exe smirked with Gutsman. exe's face. "If you beat me, I'll tell you what I know. Of course, you'll have to survive the power of Gutsman! He deleted those 3 ranked navis with a single hit!"

"Yeah?" Hub retorted as he readied himself for battle. "And we haven't lost to him yet!"

"You've been hit by a smooth criminal!" Apollo sang out as the two brothers used the GutsShoot Program Advance to take out their opponent.

"Now, tell us about S!" Hub demanded.

"Oh, all right..." the navi sighed in Gutsman. exe's form. "S is the head honcho of all the ranked players. He's number 1! No one has

ever challenged S to battle and lived. Even uttering S's real name is taboo. That's why everyone simply refers to him as 'S'."

"So, where is he now?" Hub asked. Fighting through the ranks might be proving tedious, but the 'future memories' he and Lan had suggested that trying to just skip the process would not go well. 'S', aka the 'underking', aka Serenade. exe, wouldn't allow access to the Forbidden Program to anyone who hadn't proved their strength. Which might have been part of the reason for the ranking system in the first place come to think of it...

"I don't know, but number 2 should," Copyman. exe admitted as he told the two where to find their next opponent.

"I sense it... a warrior's power...!" the purple genie navi said as Hub jacked into the battlecomp used in the N1 Grand Prix.

"Indeed..." the white, red, and green navi next to the fist agreed as his gaze focused on Hub. "But... it's just a kid... Who are you?"

"I'm Megaman! Rank 3!" Hub declared.

"You?" the second navi blinked incredulously. "You are the powerhouse who climbed his way to Rank 3 in a single day?"

"Indeed," the first navi agreed. "You seem much too innocent for the undernet..."

"It doesn't matter! I'm looking for S!"

"A runt like you wishes to see S?" the second navi laughed. "Well then, I hope you are prepared. For I am Bowlman!"

"And I am Mistman!" the first navi identified himself. "Together we share Rank 2 so that only the truly strong may meet with the underking!"

"Buddy you're a boy make a big noise, playin' in the street gonna be a big man some day! You got mud on yo' face! You big disgrace! Kickin' your can all over the place!"

Hephaestus was doing his best to tune out Apollo's singing as his Anchor and co-Anchor hopefuls were put through a much more difficult battle than they would have been expecting. In the baseline they would have only fought one of the two, but which one was a question that had proved so difficult to determine that setting both in place to share the rank had been the best available solution.

Lan rubbed his temples. Something about the Rank 2 navis was giving him an enormous headache, and for the life of him, he just couldn't figure out *why* .

"Lan, you alright?" asked the concerned Megaman. exe, who was currently in the undernet on his way back to UnderSquare. "You've been doing that ever since we got back from the DNN Station," the Human navi pointed out.

Lan sighed. "I'm fine, Hub," he said, using his brother's real name. "Just... something about Mistman and Bowlman is bugging me. I could have *sworn* that we only fought one of them the first time through."

The Blue Bomber, currently in HeatShadow Style, considered this, stopping momentarily to deal with some Spikey3s that had spawned in front of him. "Now that you mention it... (EAT THIS!)... I seem to recall the same. Which one did we fight again?"

Lan thought about it a bit, idly slotting in an AquaSword chip to speed up the process of dealing with the Spikeys. "Um... it was... it was..." It was then that he started panicking. "I... I don't remember! I only remember that we fought one, but I don't remember which one that was!"

Megaman. exe reacted in shock, freezing momentarily before he used the style's AntiDamage ability to perform a kawarimi (13) and get away from a Spikey that was about to bite his head off. "How can you not remember?!" he yelled, as he finished off the last Virus. "It was... what in the world?! I don't remember either... my memory files regarding that are corrupt for some reason!"

Lan fell back into his chair. "Just what is going on..." he wondered. "First we're reliving our life, now we can't remember things properly? What's next; Regal fusing with Nebula Grey?!"

Hub reacted to that suggestion with a sour face. "Don't tempt fate like that, Lan; you know with our luck that that'll probably end up happening," he pointed out.

Lan sighed. "Yeah, you're probably right, bro." He shook his head. "We'll worry about this later," he said. "Right now, just head back to UnderSquare so we can get the GigaFreeze from Serenade."

Megaman. exe nodded. "Roger. Almost there."

"How silly do you think they're going to feel when they remember they could just jack in from the undernet's server?" Apollo asked.

"Probably very," Hephaestus suppressed a chuckle. "But it can be forgiven since the conflicting baseline memories, not to mention the glitched memories of failed attempts they've probably seen in their dreams, must be quite confusing."

"Unfortunately the Forbidden Program cannot be 'given'. Only a Chosen One may wield the program."

Lan breathed a sigh of relief as the flames of the program turned a bright blue and Hub absorbed the program GigaFreeze into himself. Even knowing that was supposed to be the outcome, the experience had been utterly nerve-wracking.

"I knew it wouldn't take you long to reach Serenade," a familiar voice spoke from behind Lan as Hub jacked out.

"Mamoru?" Lan called out. "Is that you? What are you doing here? Did the hospital release you already?"

"Heh..." Mamoru chuckled slightly as he wheeled himself into Lan's view. "Actually, I'm the administrator of the undernet, which my father created."

Lan and Hub already knew what Mamoru had arrived to tell them, but they did their best to convey shock and surprise anyway.

"What did I do again?" Hub asked in confusion. When the alarms had blared, he and Lan had taken off in immediate pursuit of Drillman. exe before he could deliver Alpha to Wily, but when they caught up with him he had begun talking like *they* were the ones who had committed a grave crime.

"How dare you not remember!" the drill-themed hacking navi railed in fury. "I'm going to drill a hole right through you! You'll pay for what you did to my cousin Bubbleman!"

'Oh... right... that was a thing...'

"I am Drilligo Montoya! You killed my cousin! Prepare to die!"

Hephaestus began to say that this was nowhere near as convoluted as the 'Princess Bride' branch, but stopped as he actually considered the reality of that claim.

Hub's eyes widened as the undernet flickered and distorted. After the whole deal with Mr. Match, Lan's ensuing funk, fighting their way up the undernet ranks, and chasing down Drillman. exe to retrieve Alpha; he'd forgotten this was going to happen.

"Lan, he's here!"

"Hurry and grab Alpha!" Lan yelled over the connection.

"I can't let you do that," Bass. exe declared as he appeared in a swirl of his cloak and grabbed Alpha.

"Damnit!" Lan yelled. "Hub, we can't let him escape with Alpha!"

"Right!" Hub nodded as he called up the GigaFreeze program to stop Bass. exe. Holding his hands high, the bright blue ball formed and he hurled it at the ultimate navi with all his might. "GIGAFREEZE!"

A bright flash of light blinded him for a moment, but when it died down he could see his foe holding the GigaFreeze back with one hand. A few moments later and the copy of the Forbidden Program dissipated, used up.

'I can't believe I did that!' Hub chastised himself as he recalled what had happened in the original series of events a moment too late. *'Tried to use GigaFreeze on the* one *navi that it doesn't work on!'*

"You can use the 'GigaFreeze'?" Bass. exe seemed genuinely surprised. "Hmm... That means you... This is getting interesting! I will let you live for now. Farewell."

And with that, the ultimate navi vanished in a swirl of his cloak, leaving Lan and Hub to think about what was to come.

"You know you don't *have* to keep playing music for this, right?" Hephaestus asked as Apollo continued to merrily strum a foreboding tune.

"Lighten up, bro!" the sun god grinned in complete disconnection to the music he was playing. "The mighty Apollo is just setting the mood!"

Despite knowing that this was supposed to turn out fine, Lan was on edge. He and Hub had originally talked about trying to train for the final style change they knew they could earn about now, but with things this serious they'd agreed that Hub trying to fight with even minor bugs in his program could jeopardize everything. Martial law had been declared, the army was on practically every street corner, Dex was worried about his little brother in Netopia as well as everyone else, Yai was complaining that her wealthy status was being ignored, Mayl had looked at them with concern before handing them the latest version of Roll. exe's navi chip, and Protoman. exe had given them an official pass since the situation was literally 'all hands on deck'. Then there was the whole spiel about Alpha being the prototype program that administered the earliest incarnation of the net, before it gained a rudimentary level of awareness and proceeded to consume all programs connected to it.

And that was just what had happened right after he woke up that morning.

As it was right now, Lan was exceedingly thankful that the portions of Alpha controlling the AutoTanks had terrible aim...

Even if he knew it had been coming, the reveal that their grandfather, Tadashi Hikari, was the one who had created Alpha hadn't had any less of an impact on Lan and Hub. But they knew it wasn't the time to dwell on such things. Not when they needed to secure powerful enough transportation to the WWW's current base. DNN was willing to let him use the boat Sunayama had gotten for the N1 Grand Prix, but they'd had to go to Yai in order to secure a new and more powerful engine. Yet another thing they'd planned on doing earlier that they'd forgotten about recently.

And of course Yai wasn't having any of Lan's evasive explanations. She'd easily sussed out that they'd found WWW's base, but even so Lan was about to try and tell her to keep the trip a secret when he stopped and really thought about it.

"Yai..." he began. "I... I know telling you to keep this a secret from everyone would be pointless–" (14)

"Darn straight!" the short girl with seemingly endless resources glared up at him.

"Yeah," Lan rubbed the back of his head, "just... promise me you'll all be careful."

Lan had caved and let Mayl and Yai come along with him, Dex, Chaud, and even Tora with his navi Kingman. exe from the N1 Grand Prix to the island, already planning a way to send the girls back as soon as possible. Which was coming up as all of them watched in helpless horror while Dr. Cossack, the man who Lan had tracked down right before the Bubble Wash incident to ensure he installed the PressData properly, used the pulse transmission machine to enter the cyberworld and open the way forward, and was nearly killed by Bass. exe, his own creation as a result.

"Yai, Mayl!" Lan yelled as he found Dr. Cossack's pulse. "I need you to get this guy to the hospital, quickly! Dex, you help carry him to the boat!" (15)

"Roger, Lan!" Dex saluted before using his greater strength to heft the grown man and hurried him back to the boat.

"Wait'll you get a look at this, Lan! Flashman! Full Synchro!"

"Full Synchro!? How is that even possible!?"

"I have been fully digitalized! Synching with my navi is second nature to me now!"

They had all battled their way through Wily's fortress, taking out the revived WWW navis that controlled the sentry robots along the way

(16), and now he was faced with Wily who had pulse transmitted himself into the net to become the controlling mind of Alpha.

A quick look where he had to remind himself that the WWW members in chairs weren't actually dead no matter how much it looked like it, and Lan found an empty chair he could use. One that had probably been meant for Inukai and Beastman. exe who were conspicuously absent.

And so Lan readied himself in the chair, made sure the PET was connected properly and chip data properly pre-loaded, and got ready to enter the cyberworld.

"Ready, Hub?" he asked.

"Ready!"

"Alright, Pulse Transmission!"

"Alright, Hub! Let's go save the world! Full Synchro!"

They had rushed to where Wily and Bass. exe were standing over the remains of the Guardian program that kept Alpha's full power sealed just in time to see Bass. exe absorb it. And upon seeing them, the navi who hated all of humanity immediately engaged them

"Bass!" Lan called out as the body he currently shared with Hub created a barrier against the navi's attack. If... if he could just get through to Bass. exe now... "Humans aren't the way you think they are!

"Cease your lies!" the navi growled as he attacked again. "Humans think of navis as merely tools to be used. Navis who don't realize that are just as foolish!"

"Lan's never treated me that way!" Hub protested. "We're true partners, who trust and respect each other!"

"More than that, we're brothers!" Lan added and thought he saw Bass. exe hesitate for just a moment. "Even Cossack–"

"Silence!" the cloaked navi roared with fury as his creator was brought up. "Exactly what I would expect from a human! Navis have no need for operators! All we need is the strength to exist on our own! Absolute power, so that we need cower before none! I will weed out weak navis who cannot fight on their own!

"Bass!" the combined form of Hub and Lan yelled as their shared body exchanged shots with their foe. "Look back! I know that you once felt it! A bond that you treasured more than anything!"

"Hah!" the navi scarred by betrayal, that very glowing scar visible as he unleashed his power on his foes, scoffed. "You think that I retain such pathetic emotions!? Time for you to be deleted!"

"Hmph!" Wily sniffed in disdain from his spot on the sideline. "And here I was hoping that you'd have deleted each other by now..."

Bass. exe checked the attack he'd been charging up to turn and stare at the old man. "What...!?"

"Bass, the Guardian program that you destroyed..." Wily grinned wickedly. "It was the final protection placed on Alpha! It takes a lot to destroy it, you know. So I used your power. It's the reason I used Gospel to make a copy of you! Just to bring back Alpha!"

"Wily..." the ultimate navi trembled in rage. "You..."

"Navis are, after all, just tools to use! Do you see now!? I would use anything to complete my plan!"

"You despicable old man!" the currently dual voice of Megaman. exe accused.

"It doesn't matter!" Wily cackled as the cyberscape began to shake violently. "Alpha's awakening is at hand! It's the end of network

society!"

"Bass! Move!"

"Don't presume to order me, huma–wha?!" the cloaked navi yelled as an amorphous blob rose up and swallowed him. "Graaaargh!"

"Ahahahaha!" Wily laughed maniacally as the ultimate navi was consumed. "Arise Alpha! Beast who will devour Cyberworld! This is the end! Of net society...And the world! Alpha! Swallow it all! All of it! Aahahahaha! Huh...!?" Wily cut off as another blob rose up to engulf him. "Stop! What...!? Aaaahhhhh!"

The cyberscape began shaking again as yet another blob rose up in front of Lan and Hub's unified self and resolved into a distinct shape. One that showed some manner of central core and fixed a single eye on them.

"Hello, Alpha," the joint voice of Megaman. exe greeted calmly as he began firing rapidly to expose the vulnerable core while dodging the disembodied swipes of its arms. "I saved something special just for you while I was fighting Bass. Salamander! Fountain! Bolt! Gaia Blade! Program Advance! *Master Style* !"

"Weee are the champions, my friiieeeennd!" Apollo began as Alpha collapsed before Megaman. exe's onslaught.

"This isn't over quite yet," Hephaestus posed as the two entered the door left behind.

"I've been monitoring Guardian, to stop Alpha's reawakening. It's my duty, as the creator of Alpha. When Guardian was destroyed, I thought that all was lost. Thanks to you two, the world is safe. Now the core is gone and the other parts of Alpha will fade. So how are things in net society these days, Lan and Hub? Are the navis and humans getting along well?"

"Of course! Some still use navis for bad things, but we'll stop them! right, Hub?"

"For certain! Gramps, the network society we live in is a great place!"

"I see, that's wonderful."

The two raced for the exit of the Pulse Transmission system in their shared body as Alpha collapsed around them, and as they approached a certain spot their 'future memories' blared with something important that caused the two to sidestep just in time to dodge a blob of Alpha that had risen up to grab them.

"That was close!" Lan's voice yelped.

"No time to stop, we have to hurry!" Hub yelled as they continued running before any more surprises could try and stop them.

"Did..." Hephaestus stared at the log of what had just occurred, "did you *automate* a subconscious warning so they could sidestep that?"

"Mmmmaaayyybbeeee..." Apollo drawled.

"...Where... am I...?" the navi asked the darkness he'd awoken to. "Am I... alive...?"

"...Grrr...Growwwlll..." came the answer from the only other creature present, for all that it had not destroyed had fled from it.

"...What do... you want...? ...Will you save me?"

"Grrr...Roarrr!"

"So... now it's time to try for that Bug Style..." Hub made a face. Poor programming customization always made him feel funny.

"Yeah," Lan nodded. "Even if we never use it again afterwards, I want it in case Bass survived and wants a rematch. I mean, we can't count on Hub Style since he copied it from us, so... Yeah. Let me know if it gets too bad."

"Roger."

The mettaur just blinked at the flower that landed on its face, before it began laughing at the blue navi. It apparently found the situation so hilarious that it failed to attack.

"Lan..." the navi moaned. "I don't feel so good..."

"What's wrong?" the voice of the NetOp asked before becoming alarmed. "Hub! Your health is dropping like a rock! Jack out! Jack out *now!* "

"Okay, let's try this again..." Lan started. Never again was he risking *that* bug.

"Yeah," Hub nodded. Whatever was wrong this time couldn't be that bad...

He raised his buster at the Canodumb that appeared and blinked as a shield formed on the end of it instead of firing.

"Okay... this could be useful..."

"We seem to be attracting a lot of viruses, Lan," Hub complained after the umpteenth battle just trying to get to his friends' homepages.

"Maybe if you stopped clomping around like a wounded buffalo," Lan shot back. "You know, *try* to move quietly?"

"I *am!* " Hub yelled back, which of course attracted yet another virus.

"Here it comes...!" Hub declared as he felt the by-now familiar onset of a new style change. "And about time!"

The navi's form blurred before resolving into a new yellow-colored motif. With an asymmetrical design on most of the body and the tell-tale glowing spots of high bug concentration on his gloves, boots, and helmet. Every few moments, part of his new form crackled with electricity and distorted at random.

"ElecBug Style," Lan nodded with satisfaction. "Now we're ready. And the first stop is to finally challenge the king of the undernet for his title!"

"Brother? Why aren't you doing anything about these things? They are beginning to annoy the mighty Apollo," the sun god looked less than pleased as a furry eight-legged critter with long ears and a cute face continued to obscure his vision by perching on his head and dangling its forelimbs over his face. Another was gripping his arm and happily munching away on the sun god's chips and dip while one gripping his other arm cheerfully sipped from his lemonade glass. A few more were rubbing up against his legs and crawling over other parts of his body with more arriving every few seconds. The critters, actually physical manifestations of bugs in Yggdrasil's systems, had their eyes keenly fixed on the display of the two brothers training their new bug-based fighting style.

"But they seem to like you!" Hephaestus grinned. "Besides, I want to let a few more climb in before I initiate counter-measures. Best to get as many as possible while they're being so cooperative as to stay in one spot and behave themselves."

"The mighty Apollo does *not* call this behaving..."

"Wow..." Hub breathed as he took in the area beneath the UnderSquare, with its white pathways and calm soothing waters, "this place is so... serene."

"Yeah, it's definitely nothing like you'd expect to find connected to the deepest levels of the undernet..."

"You will be sorry that I didn't delete you..." Darkman. exe groaned out as his program began to deteriorate from the damage Hub had inflicted upon him in battle. "Just wait until you feel the Dark of the underking, Serenade! Continue on, and meet your deletion!"

And with that, the dark assassin, the deleter of 9633 other navis, one of the obstacles between Hub and Serenade, succumbed to his wounds.

"You, there!" a voice suddenly halted Hub in his tracks as a samurai-armored navi appeared in his path. "Let me get a look at you! I'm Yamatoman, the greatest spear-fighter ever! And I shall shishkebab you if you try to go any further!"

"Are you another of Serenade's bodyguards?" Hub asked curiously.

Yamatoman. exe started at the question, but recovered quickly and eyed Hub with a calculating gaze. "Indeed, you are more perceptive than your youthful frame would suggest. But unlike Darkman, who serves for the opportunity to battle Serenade himself, I serve my master of my own will. And I am ordered to let none pass save those that my lord Serenade sends for personally! Have at you!"

As Hub crested the last step to the uppermost point within the underking's sanctuary, the cyberspace wavered as a great force made itself known.

"Darkman waited, patiently seeking a duel with me..." an effeminate voice rang out from the top of the stairs. "I told him I would, if he could delete 10000 navis there. Yamatoman left the SciLab Elite Corps to follow me. He was an excellent soldier. My right-hand man. Even I am forced to recognize the power of those two. And, of course, yours as well, since you defeated them."

With another great warping of digital space, a navi appeared.

"So you're Serenade," Hub stated calmly as he took in the navi's appearance.

The navi had an effeminate face that mimicked the darker skin tones found on the human race, baggy white pants that seemed made of silk over a pitch black bodysuit, and golden armor consisting of a helmet from which sprouted three long lengths of pale blonde digital hair, thick bracers striped with darker bands of gold, shoulder guards, sandal straps over the feet, and a stylistic belt much like a championship belt with a navi symbol in the center composed of a green circle with a vertical black line from the top to the center. The same navi symbol on Mamoru's wheelchair. Behind the navi floated a pair of detached curved objects that at once seemed as delicate as silk and as strong as steel, evoking a feeling of both zen-like peace and unconquerable strength. And while the navi seemed androgynous at first glance, the form-fitting bodysuit definitely indicated a female figure. (17)

"You're a girl!" Lan yelled through the connection.

Serenade. exe paused and blinked at the declaration. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"Well... no," Lan admitted, "but, well, you're the under *king* and all, so..."

"Ah, I see..." Serenade. exe chuckled. "A common misconception. The title of king may have once been restricted to the male gender, but even in ancient human times the flaw of only male rulers was

seen. The laws of some nations declared that only a king could rule, but those same laws never proclaimed that only a male could be crowned king, and so with the ability to crown a female ruler as 'king', the people saw no need to change the practice. As such, I am king of the undernet, and king I shall remain. Unless you defeat me in a duel for the title of course. For the two of you have passed all obstacles placed before you and earned that right. But do not be fooled into thinking this duel shall be easy." (18)

"Yeah..." Hub agreed. "I can feel your power from here. It's unlike anything we've ever faced before..."

"How keen of you to notice my power even before we begin. You mentioned that I am different from other navis? That is because the source of my power..."

"Is mercy," Lan and Hub finished in stereo.

Serenade. exe blinked in pleasant surprise before responding with a gentle smile. "Indeed. I love and respect my enemy and thereby win. Come now. Let me show you."

Even Apollo seemed at a loss for witty quips as the nail-biting duel took place. Serenade. exe's defense which reflected all attacks was almost impenetrable unless she had committed to one of her most powerful attacks, and Megaman. exe practically danced around her lesser techniques, patiently waiting for an opening.

But in the end, there could be only one king of the undernet.

Serenade. exe knelt from the force of the final blow, and took in her opponent. Megaman. exe had not emerged unscathed, but he was in much better shape than she was. "I didn't think that I would ever meet a navi as strong as I," Serenade. exe smiled as she stood again, the picture of calm grace despite her defeat. "The trust that you two share makes you even more powerful. That, too, is a form of

love and respect. Here. Take this," she continued as she held out the digital symbol of the highest rank in the undernet to the victor. "This shows that you are the strongest navi in Cyberworld. But He is trying to reawaken..."

"Bass..." her opponent stated with calm certainty as she looked off to the distance.

"It seems that you have fought with Him before..." the former underking smiled. "I, too, have fought Him in the past. I only managed to defeat Him after a battle lasting days. I came very close to being deleted myself... Like me, He is a denizen of the Dark. He is the incarnation of destruction. He prowls the Cyberworld with his wounded body. And now I can feel Him growing stronger day by day, made more powerful with the bugs that he absorbs. He uses these bug fragments to heal his wounds."

"So... he survived Alpha..." the NetOp mused. How odd. He almost sounded... relieved...

"Indeed He has," Serenade. exe confirmed. "He will reawaken with the howl of a beast. You will only be the strongest navi once you defeat Him."

"I understand..." Megaman. exe nodded.

"Megaman," Serenade. exe considered many things to say, but decided that the two had enough to deal with as it was, "we shall meet again, in some other place... Farewell."

And with that, she warped the digital space and left both navi and NetOp to their thoughts.

"Lan..." Hub began as he approached the BugFrag trader. "Are we sure this is a good idea?"

"Probably not," Lan admitted, "but we've got to try anyway. Bass... no one should have to suffer feelings like that for as long as he has. If there's any chance we can get through to him, then we have to try."

"Yeah..." Hub sighed as he began feeding BugFrags into the trader. "But this is still probably going to hurt..."

"All your Bass are belong to us!" (19)

"... *Seriously* ?" Hephaestus gave the grinning sun god a look.

"Roaaaaarrr!" the familiar cry of fury sounded out shortly after Hub had finished feeding enough BugFrags into the trader that he'd lost count.

"Okay, that did it!" Lan yelped across the connection.

"I have awakened..." a sinister voice echoed across the area as the cyberspace began to quake.

"Here he comes Lan!" Hub yelled back as a flash of light lit the area, revealing a black-armored navi with golden highlights clad in a long brown cloak and surrounded by a glowing aura. "Bass!"

"You're alive!"

"Bass?" the navi's face twisted in confusion. "Who is this... Bass...?"

"Don't you remember us?" Lan called out. "We're..." Lan hesitated for a moment on what he'd been about to claim. "We wanted to make sure you were okay... I mean... how could we be your friends if you weren't?"

The navi snorted in derision. "I search only for power. I have no name... I need no friends... I exist only to battle... I shall test the power that the bugs gave me... On you!"

The cloaked navi lunged forward, a pair of bug-lighted animalistic claws appearing on either side of him as he did. Hub dodged the strikes and noted the deep furrows they gouged in the terrain.

"He's... I think he's fused with the Gospel bug beast!" Hub yelled as the navi brought his arms out of his cloak and formed a cannon shaped like said beast's head which then breathed a wide gout of flame that he narrowly backstepped from.

"Then there's no choice!" Lan called back. "Initiate style change!"

"Right!" Hub yelled as rings of code rotated around his form to the interest of their opponent. When they finished, he was in the yellow bug-lighted form he'd spent so much time earning. "ElecBug Style!"

"Useless!" their opponent yelled as another gout of flame issued forth, only for his eyes to widen as his opponent charged through, his body protected by a green glow and swinging a fan. "Wha?"

"Northwind!" the navi cried as a wind sprang up and blew the aura on his opponent away. The fan then vanished and his arm formed into a sword that burned with flame and slashed. The sword then turned blue as he slashed again, then yellow crackling with electricity, and finally green as he completed his assault, the cloaked navi falling back from the damage.

"BURN!" the cloaked navi roared as he got to his feet and formed the Gospel-head cannon again, this time breathing out a gout of green flame as the protective green glow around his opponent vanished.

"AAAAHHHH!" Hub yelled as the bizarrely wood-type attack tore into his elec-type form.

"HAHAHAHAHA!" the cloaked navi boomed as his aura reformed and he began charging up his normal cannons and firing a barrage of energy blasts. His glee turned to confusion as his opponent began to phase erratically, his form seeming to glitch out of the way of

every single shot before it hit. And right as his barrage died down, a rockcube came hurtling at him which took out his aura again.

"GutsImpact!" Hub yelled as a final movement glitch took him right in front of Bass. exe and he punched with all his might. "Lance!" he yelled again and a row of sharp spears hit the cloaked navi in the back.

The cloaked navi growled as he took another shot which seemed to strike home, but instead was really a dummy as a trio of shuriken rained down on him.

"DIE!" he yelled as he called forth the claws from before to rake the area and then bring his aura back. He grinned with satisfaction as one of them struck, only for that grin to vanish as a red navi avatar slashed his aura away again. A few moments later and a pink one managed to drain away part of his vitality and give it to his opponent.

"Time to finish it, Hub!" the NetOp declared. "Program Advance–"

"VANISH INTO NOTHINGNESS!" the cloaked navi howled as he formed a huge Gospel-head cannon which began charging.

Hub's eyes widened as he rushed to use what Lan had sent him. "Oh, cra–"

"VANISHING WORLD!" Bass. exe roared as his Gospel-head cannon fired a humongous white laser that detonated the entire area around its target. Seeing no movement as the dust cleared, he began to laugh until a noise penetrated his thoughts right before his aura returned.

–beep...ding!

The explosion of the planted device sent him reeling to the ground, where he lay prone, only able to stare as the dust finished settling to reveal his opponent much worse for wear, but still alive.

"How...?" Bass. exe growled in impotent frustration as his opponent limped to his feet. "I have no equal! I am destruction incarnate! I have far more power than you! How...?"

"Because you... are fighting alone!" Hub declared, endlessly thankful for the UnderShot program (or was it UnderShirt?). "As long as I have Lan and my friends with me, I have no limits!"

"What idiocy is this?" Bass. exe growled as he struggled to his own feet. "Strength does not rely on others!"

"You're wrong!" Hub declared. "When navis are able to completely trust their operators, humans, then they are finally able to realize their power! And when friends stand together, they become stronger than either could ever be alone! You, too, once had someone you could trust like that!"

"I trust no one but myself!"

"Bass, try to remember! Let us help you!"

"...Urrgh...!" the self-proclaimed emissary of destruction clutched his head in pain. "Who is this man who invades my memory! What is this... feeling? He is... father? ...No! Never! I need no one! Power is all! Destruction is my purpose!" With that, Bass. exe raised his hand and began charging up the most powerful EarthBreaker that Hub could recall seeing before striking the ground at his own feet. "Uraaaaaagh!"

Hub shielded his eyes from the light the impact produced, but when it died down Bass. exe was gone.

"Sorry, Lan..." he sighed. "We failed..."

"It was worth a shot, though, right?"

"Yeah... it was."

"We'll bring him around next time..."

It was a few weeks after their trek through the Secret Area, and not much longer until Nebula sprung to life. But Lan was feeling a bit down.

"Lan, you alright?" Megaman. exe asked in concern. After all, Lan had actually done his homework for once!

Lan sighed. "I know stopping bad guys comes first and everything, but I'm still a bit bummed that we never got to face Chaud in the N1 Grand Prix," he admitted.

"Well, lucky for you, I've got some news for you to *chow* down on," Hub prompted, as a certain e-mail popped up in the PET's inbox.

"...Did you install Mr. Famous's Humor program again while I wasn't looking?" Lan asked suspiciously (20). Hub rather deliberately ignored that, instead opening the e-mail. And it was exactly what he had expected, perfect for cheering Lan up.

"Looks like it's time for the BattleChipGP!" Hub announced cheerily.

"...Remind me, why did this happen again?" Lan wondered.

"Um...I don't really remember myself. I know Yai is the sponsor and Bass turned up at the very end," Hub sheepishly admitted. "But Chaud is going to be there," he reminded his brother.

"...Alright! Let's win the BattleChipGP!" Lan declared, snapping out of his funk.

"Remember, Lan, we gotta sign up on the net," the blue navi admonished.

"I know that! Jack In! Megaman, Execute!" Lan declared, sending Megaman. exe into the net to sign up for the tournament. (21)

"The mighty Apollo would also like to know why this is being held. Not that the mighty Apollo disapproves of course. It just..."

"Comes out of nowhere? Apparently there's still an active, if mostly forgotten, task force charged with finding and capturing Bass. The navi that intervened after their fight with Flameman is one of them in fact. They have a fair bit of knowledge mixed in with a lot of misconceptions, among it the fact that Bass enjoys challenging strong opponents. Thus they think that arranging a big tournament will draw him out to where he can be more readily captured or eliminated. Of course, they haven't really put much thought into the possibility of collateral damage, such as what could happen to the navi that catches Bass's attention. Nor have they really thought about what else such a tournament might draw the attention of."

"Such as?"

"Interesting question, with an even more interesting answer. This branch has a number of events that I can only classify as 'maybe baseline'. As in, maybe they happened in the baseline and maybe they didn't. This tournament is among them, and... Well, it could potentially attract almost anything that exists in the iteration."

"That leads the mighty Apollo to a better question: Why did you see fit to allow its inclusion in this attempt?"

"Yggdrasil judged it would provide an extra five percent to the overall success chance."

"There! We're all signed up!" Lan declared.

"Hm...something's off," his brother said confusedly.

"What do you mean, Hub?" Lan asked, looking down at his PET.

"It's just...wasn't there some kind of Program Deck we were supposed to use in this tournament? I remember you installing

something like that," Hub remembered.

Lan thought on it for a second. He *did* seem to recall using some kind of Program Deck thing. Huh. "That's strange. I wonder why they didn't use it this time?" Lan wondered.

"Maybe little things changed slightly and added up, like how the Rank 2 navi was both Mistman and Bowlman," Hub suggested.

"Could be. Anyway, let's not worry about that right now! Did you get the list of tournament entrants?" Lan asked.

"Yep. Right here in an e-mail. Chaud is on there, not to anyone's surprise. I also see a lot of familiar faces on here. Dex and Gutsman, Mayl and Roll, Tora and Kingman, Higsby and Numberman, and..." Hub trailed off when he came across a few particular names.

"What is it?" Lan asked in concern.

"Nothing, just that a lot of the Gospel and WWW Operators are also in this tournament. Which is weird, since they were all arrested," Hub said in confusion.

"That is weird. Why would they let them of all people compete?" Lan wondered, scratching his head in confusion.

Just then, the PET's mail alert went off. "E-mail for you, Lan! It's an ad from Higsby's!" Hub announced.

Lan was immediately distracted by this. "Maybe we should swing by and see what Higsby's got for sale!" he declared.

"Woah there! The first round of the Tournament's going to start soon! We can stop by Higsby's later," Hub pointed out.

"Alright alright..."

"What, no witty comments?"

"The mighty Apollo is saving himself for later."

"Wow, Lan, I can't believe you're on time!" Mayl said in shock as the Hikari boy walked up to the school entrance. Dex looked pretty flabbergasted as well.

"Me neither. I almost went to the TV Station instead, since they held the N1 there," Lan admitted sheepishly. Of course, that was when he noticed the new face, a blond girl who looked somewhat Netopian. *'Oh yeah, that's Mary, Yai's stay-at-home friend!'* he abruptly remembered.

"Hey there! Haven't seen you around before. I'm Lan Hikari!" he introduced.

"And I'm his navi, Megaman! But you can call me Hub if you want," Hub introduced.

"Um, nice to meet you. I'm Mary Towa," Mary said shyly.

"She's my homestay sister!" Yai's voice was heard chiming in. The group there turned to see the short girl walk up to them. "Well well, I didn't expect to see you here on time, Lan!" she teased.

"Yeah yeah... Anyway, are you and Glide competing too, Yai?" Lan asked. He didn't think they were, but it never hurt to double check.

"Nope! This time, I'm the sponsor! How else do you think this got started after the problems with the N1?" she pointed out.

"Err, good point," Lan admitted. He then turned back to Mary. "Anyway, it's nice to meet you, Mary!" he said.

"Thanks. I heard you two were a big "travesty" in Netopia..." Mary said sincerely.

"No, really, it was nothing," Lan bashfully said.

Meanwhile, the others were silent at this, wondering how Lan didn't even realize what she had actually said. Wait, he's Lan. Never mind.

"I don't think she means that as a compliment, Lan," Hub pointed out.

"Huh? Really?" Lan blinked in surprise.

"Well, it is her second language, so she makes mistakes sometimes," Yai tried to rationalize.

"I'm not seeing what the big deal is!"

"Lan, you should know what travesty means! You're in the sixth grade now!"

"Oh, no! Did I get it wrong again? Sorry, Lan," Mary apologized profusely.

"Nah, don't sweat it. I got what you meant to say, so it doesn't matter," Lan waved it off.

"Hey, Mary! Forgetting something?" another voice cut in.

"Oh, right!" Mary realized, bringing out her PET. "Everyone, this is my navi," she started.

"Ring!" Ring. exe introduced herself. "I hear you're the best, Lan and Hub, so you're the perfect opponents for a beauty like me and a genius like Mary! I can hardly wait to battle!" she exclaimed.

"Same for me!" Hub said in return. Enthusiasm seemed to be in the air.

"Oh, Ring! I told you to cool it..." Mary said nervously.

"It's OK! Look, we're making friends! It's easy, Mary," Ring. exe shot back.

"Well, I've got some GP business, so you'll have to excuse me! Let's go, Mary!" Yai declared.

"See you again, everyone!" Mary greeted them farewell.

"Bye-bye!" Ring. exe chimed in. And with that, they left to go inside.

"Mary sure is quiet for a Netopian!" Mayl noted in curiosity.

"Yeah, but that navi of hers sure isn't!" Dex said in a rather understating way.

"Well, there's all kinds of teams, I guess! OK, Lan, now you'll get your chance to battle!" Hub declared.

"Yep! Let's do it!" his brother exclaimed. He was just about to go inside, when Dex stopped him.

"Uh, Lan? You *may* want to check the tourney first," Dex nervously said, pointing at the board that had been set up in front of the fountain.

"Why, what's the–HOLY–!" Lan almost swore when he noticed the board.

"What?" Hub asked in confusion. Lan wordlessly held the PET in front of him so Hub could take a look with the camera. "Woah. That's complicated," Hub said, a deer-in-headlights look on his face. And it really was. There were so many tiers, so many rounds, so many different ways to get bys. There were even matches that required specific matchups!

"I bet Yai's business is sorting this thing out, because I can't make heads or tails of this thing!" Lan complained.

"About the only thing anybody can tell with that thing is who they're facing next," Roll. exe agreed.

"Yeah. I'm not wasting a single bit of processing trying to figure that mess out," Gutsman. exe flat out said.

"Well, it looks like our first opponent is someone named Kenji with an off-the-shelf navi," Hub said as he finally found Lan's name on there.

"Good luck, Lan!" Mayl cheered.

"Yeah, you better not lose! I'm the one who's going to beat you!" Dex boasted.

"We'll see about that! Let's go, Hub!" Lan declared.

"Roger!"

"Wow... Even the mighty Apollo needed time to decipher that tournament plan. A mortal would need a flowchart to even have a chance..."

"Actually, I think that *was* the flowchart."

"Well, that was easy," Lan said, waiting in front of the tourney board for his next match. He had already won his first battle in the tournament.

"Well, that guy had only bought his navi and a chip folder yesterday. Looks like these early rounds are more to find the more capable NetBattlers," Hub mused.

"I guess... Hey! The board just updated!" Lan exclaimed.

"It's still a complete mess, but it looks like we're facing Higsby next," Hub noted.

"It's been a while since we've fought Numberman. Wonder if he's gotten any stronger?" Lan wondered.

"Lan!"

Lan turned to see Higsby running up to him. "Hey, Higsby! Congratulations on your win," he complimented.

"Yeah, well I'm not happy, huh!" Higsby complained. "My first match had me face Ms. Mari, huh!"

"Ouch," Lan winced. He was well aware Higsby had a crush on her.

"Yeah. Still, no reason to let that get in the way of our match, huh," Higsby shrugged.

"Looking forward to it!" Lan cheered.

"Hey, Numberman. How've you been?" Hub asked.

"As well as anyone could be, I suppose. I've gotten a lot better since our WWW days, Megaman. You better watch yourself out there!" Numberman. exe tossed his way.

"Like Lan said, we're both looking forward to it!" Hub said in return.

"Ack! It's almost time for our match!" Higsby exclaimed as he noticed the time.

"Yikes! We'd better get in there!" Lan hurriedly said. The two of them immediately ran inside. As they did so, Lan reminded himself to ask Yai why the battlecomp looked like his Home Page. That was kind of creepy.

"The mighty Lan versus the awesome hair! Round... whatever! FIGHT!"

"Man, Higsby and Numberman have sure gotten a lot tougher," Lan noted, walking back to the board.

"I'll say. I wonder where Numberman got the idea to use a tenbou as a sword?" Hub wondered.

"I'm just glad I sent that AreaGrab in time. That TimeBomb+ was *nasty* ," Lan winced.

"We have been using a lot of those lately," Hub mused, before noticing the board. "Lan, the board's updated!"

"Looks like our next opponent is someone else with a NormalNavi. Should be a piece of cake!" Lan cheered, before running back inside, ignoring Hub's admonishments.

As he did though, Chaud walked up to the board, shaking his head at Lan's antics. "Should have figured you'd have been invited too, Hikari," he muttered. He also couldn't help but think back to how he got involved...

"A threat?"

"Yes. Have you heard of the upcoming NetBattle tournament?"

"You mean the BattleChipGP?"

"Yes. This is the threat mail."

'"We will delete the winning navi in the BattleChipGP. - The WWW"'

"What?! But the WWW was disbanded."

"Yes, it was, so this could be just a hoax. But we can't act until after the fact. So we want you to go enter the BattleChipGP."

"An undercover investigation..."

"Precisely. You work apart from us, observing the tournament from the inside, and keeping tabs on anything suspicious. This is a job that only you, the official ace NetBattler, can do. Do you accept?"

"...I accept."

"Contact us if you see anything suspicious. And be careful."

"Lord Chaud, do you think that the WWW is really behind this?" Protoman. exe questioned, bringing Chaud back to reality.

"I don't know," Chaud admitted. "There's only one thing that's clear. They said 'We will delete the winning navi in the BattleChipGP.' So if I win, the perpetrator will reveal himself to me."

"So we'll be decoys?" Protoman. exe queried, with a slight hint of distaste in his voice.

"And why not? WWW or no, there isn't anybody we can't defeat. Right, Protoman?" Chaud questioned.

"Leave it to me, Lord Chaud," Protoman. exe affirmed. With that said, Chaud walked in to begin his next match.

"You do know that song only applies to one of them, right?"

Apollo ignored Hephaestus as he continued with his rendition of *'Sunglasses At Night'* .

Mary Towa never thought that she'd ever be this lucky. All her life, she had envied the kids who were able to play normally, while she was forced to just watch because of the limitations of her pacemaker, not to mention her own body. She told herself that she didn't really care and that she preferred to be alone, but that was really a lie, wasn't it? Why else would she have customized Ring. exe the way she had? (22)

She had been furious when Ring. exe had signed her up for the BattleChipGP without telling her. But...meeting all these wonderful

people was truly amazing. She had honest-to-goodness friends now. "Hey, Ring?" Mary ventured.

"Yeah, Mary?"

"...Thanks for signing me up in the tournament. I've been having a great time," Mary admitted.

"I told you, didn't I?! Can't go wrong with one of my plans!" Ring. exe boasted. Just then, they heard two familiar voices.

"I told you not to underestimate them. What do you do, you underestimate them!"

"Give me a break, Hub! I didn't know they were going to have some Style Change like that! What kind of Style Change has Hammers?!"

"You're lucky I managed to change to HeatShadow and get off Anti-Damage."

"Yeah yeah. Hm? Oh, hey Mary!" Lan greeted, walking up from where he had had his last match.

"Hi, Lan. Did you have a good match?" Mary asked.

"Eh, I kind of underestimated my opponent and almost lost," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "But we pulled through in the end!"

"You wouldn't have needed to if you had taken him seriously to begin with!" Megaman. exe chimed in. You know, it was funny. Why did Lan call him Hub anyway?

"Hey, Mary! The board's updated!" Ring. exe chimed in unexpectedly. Turning, the four of them noticed the matchups.

"Hey, it looks like it's us up next!" Lan noticed.

"Oh! Really?" Mary asked in shock.

"Well, this ought to be fun! Better watch out, Megaman!" Ring. exe chirped.

"Right back at you!" the Blue Bomber returned.

"Come on, Mary! Let's go get ready!" Lan declared, rushing off on his skates.

"Lan, wait!" Mary called, going after him as fast as she could. Which was just walking speed because anything more would overwork the pacemaker.

"Well well, didn't expect to see a matchup like this. You both ready?" Yai asked of the two NetBattlers, who were standing at the battlecomp.

"And here we have the Blue Whirlwind of Megaman versus the new up-and-comer from Netopia, Ring!" Ribbita reported. "Which navi will be the winner of this round? Let's find out! Battle routine, set!"

"Execute!" both navis declared, before immediately launching into battle. Megaman. exe started by shooting his MegaBuster at Ring. exe. However, Mary had customized Airshoes into Ring. exe by default, so the blond navi simply flew above the shots. Megaman. exe didn't take that lying down though. He analyzed her flight pattern and fired off a Charged Shot at her. It impacted Ring. exe directly in the torso, knocking her back to the ground.

"Tch! Not bad!" Ring. exe complimented. "Hey, Mary! Give me something to work with here!" she called out.

"Um...here! Mega Boomerang, download!" Mary declared. Having said that, a wood-aligned boomerang appeared in Ring. exe's hand and she tossed it forward at Megaman. exe. The Blue Bomber jumped over the initial pass-by of the M-Boomer, peppering Ring. exe with MegaBuster shots. However, Mary sent Ring. exe a Guard chip, which she put to good use. Just when Megaman. exe was

waiting for the giant Mettaur-helmet shield to go down, he got caught by the return of the M-Boomer.

He winced in pain, before giving a grin. "You're not half-bad yourself!" he said. "Lan!"

"Coming at ya! Mega Cannon: Triple Download!" Lan slotted said Chips in.

"Program Advance: Zeta-Cannon 3!" Megaman. exe declared, firing off the barrage of cannon blasts. Ring. exe widened her eyes before the blasts impacted where she stood. As the five seconds were up, Megaman. exe's cannon disappeared. He stood there, waiting for the smoke to clear.

Suddenly, from behind him, three shurikens appeared, slamming into his back. "Gah!" he yelled, flung forward due to the shurikens. As he impacted the ground, he turned behind him to see what had attacked. There, he saw Ring. exe, who looked scathed, but not out of it.

"Phew! Couldn't have timed that a little earlier, Mary?" she asked of her NetOp.

"Um...maybe you shouldn't have just stood there?" Mary offered.

"Whaddya talking about?! Oh, forget it. You put up a good fight, Megaman, but this game's winner is going to be me!" Ring. exe declared, prepping for her finisher. "Ring Boomerang!" she declared, swinging her head forward. Her pigtails detached from her head, forming into twin ring-shaped boomerangs that flew at Megaman. exe. But the Blue Bomber was calm, having received Chip Data from Lan. Just as the Ring Boomerang was about to hit him, he vanished.

Ring. exe's eyes widened, as she recognized the tactic. "AreaGrab?!" she said in shock, before hearing an unpleasant sound behind her.

"Program Advance: LifeSword2!" Megaman. exe declared, slashing Ring. exe directly in the back with the fused version of FireSword, AquaSword, and ElecSword. There was an explosion, and Ring. exe was knocked clean across the arena.

"Gkh...not bad!" Ring. exe complimented, despite being in pain. Sparks flew all over her. She couldn't take it anymore; she logged out.

"Ring has Logged Out! Meaning that the winner is: Megaman!" Ribbita announced.

"We did it!" Lan cheered. "That was a great match, Mary," he said enthusiastically.

"Really? You're so strong...we didn't stand a chance," Mary said morosely.

"No, don't say that! You almost got us! You might have won this if I hadn't gotten those chips off in time! And it's not like this is your last match, is it?" Lan questioned.

"I guess not. I'm sad that we lost, but...I had fun with this! Thanks, Lan!" Mary smiled.

"Any time!" Lan grinned.

"Ah, how the times do change, eh brother?" Apollo mused. "The wise Apollo believes it really wasn't all that long ago in the local era that a child like the lovely Mary wouldn't have lived at all with such a condition, much less become a respected warrioress."

Hephaestus just smiled. The pace at which mortals improved their lives with technology was rather amazing at times, no matter how many problems came along with it.

"I can't believe after spending all that time fighting at the school, now we have to go all the way to the TV Station," Lan commented, walking up Beach Street.

"Can't be helped. Gutsman and Roll's fight pretty much destroyed the comp space. And apparently there wasn't enough left in the budget to get it fixed," Hub pointed out.

"I still need to find out why it looked like my home page. That was just plain creepy," Lan shuddered. "Anyway, Mary was pretty chipper after we cheered her up," he remembered.

"Especially after we pointed out Chaud to her," Hub said wryly.

"I know! I swear she was *blushing* !" Lan grinned. "I'm telling you, she has a crush on him!"

"Well, regardless of that, we're here," Hub noted. Lan walked right up to the hastily-constructed tournament board.

"Let's see, our next opponent is...Wait, WHAT?!" Lan exclaimed in shock.

"Lan, what is it?!" Hub asked in concern.

"Our next opponent...it's–!" Lan attempted to say.

"Hi, boys!"

"Gah! Mom!" Lan yelled, turning around to face behind him. Standing there was indeed their mother, Haruka Hikari.

"Wait, Mom, *you're* our next opponent?!" Hub said in shock.

"Sorry I didn't tell you, Lan and Hub! Think of it as a family gathering!" Haruka said in a chipper tone.

"But..." Lan stammered.

"Now, Lan, don't go easy on me just because I'm your mom!" she said sternly.

"But..." Hub also stammered.

"Oh, not you too, Hub! I know I don't look it, but your father has taught me a lot about navi Operation. I'll be fine! ...Unless you're scared of losing to your mom," Haruka teased.

Lan snapped out of it. "No way! Just watch, Mom! We're going to win this thing!"

"Well, I'm not going to give up without a fight myself!" the Hikari matriarch shot right back.

Hub shook his head at this, before noticing the time. "Uh, Lan, Mom? It's about time for our match," he reminded them.

"Ack! Come on, Mom!" Lan declared, grabbing her by the hand and pulling her along with him.

"Wait, Lan, slow down! I'm not as young as I used to be!"

"Awkward rating?"

"Hmm... Seven point five. They may be a loving family, but there's plenty of ways this could be made worse."

"I didn't expect Mom to be that tough!" Lan said in shock as he walked outside the TV Station to catch some fresh air.

"Thank goodness for StepSword," Hub agreed, before noticing a certain someone. "Hey, isn't that Chaud?" he noted.

Lan blinked. "Yeah! It is! HEY! Chaud!" he yelled.

Chaud reacted and stopped leaning against a wall. "Huh?! Oh, it's you. What is it, Lan?" he asked, rolling his eyes.

Lan immediately ran up to him. "I figured you might be here. Let's finish what we started last time!" he declared.

"What? Look, I'm here on duty. Otherwise I wouldn't have even bothered coming to this tournament," Chaud mentioned.

Lan paused. "What exactly do you mean?" he asked in a serious tone.

"There's a chance that some remnants of the WWW are here today. If we let our guards down, it could be all over for us. Now, if you'll excuse me..." And with that, Chaud left to go inside the Station, likely to fight in his next match.

Lan looked at his retreating form in worry. "Were there WWW remnants in this tournament?" he asked Hub.

"Not that I can recall. But like we've discussed, our memories regarding the BattleChipGP aren't as concrete or lucid as our memories regarding most of the stuff we've run into," Hub pointed out.

"Yeah. Only thing I can really remember is that the whole point of this was to draw out Bass," Lan mused. "Well, we'll just worry about WWW remnants if they show up!" he said, putting it out of mind for now.

"Alright. By the way, the board's updated," Hub said. Lan immediately skated up to it, looking for his name.

"It's actually getting a bit more manageable," he noted. "Course, I still can't really make heads or tails of it. ...Aha! Looks like our next opponent is Dr. Froid and Iceman! Better get the elec chips ready," he mused, before skating back into the Station, much to the irritation of the staff.

"HEY! NO SKATING IN THE HALLS!"

"Man, was that intense!" Lan sighed, plopping down into a seat in the TV Station.

"Yeah, not only was Iceman a lot tougher than he was the first time we fought him, but then we had that marathon against those elementally-aligned navis," Hub commiserated.

"Who, of course, had Style Changes as well. It's really become a staple of navi customization, hasn't it?" Lan mused.

"Well, of course! Most custom navis these days were customized out of a Style Change," his brother pointed out.

"Yeah... Course, they can't compare to you, Hub!" Lan declared.

"Thanks, but don't get overconfident again, Lan."

"I know that!"

Just then, Mayl walked up. "Hey, Lan!" she said, sitting down in the seat next to him.

"Oh, hey, Mayl! How was your last match?" Lan asked.

"Pretty good. Actually, my opponent was actually Sal!" Mayl remembered.

"Oh, really? How'd you do?"

"Well..."

"Hey, Lan!" Yai's voice was heard. Turning, Lan and Mayl got out of their seats to see the short girl walk up to them, along with someone who Lan barely recognized.

"Yeah, Yai?" he wondered. *'Who is that again...?'* Lan wondered about the boy who had come up with her.

"I've got someone to introduce to you! Go ahead, introduce yourself," Yai stated, moving back so the boy with her could speak.

Said boy was wearing a yellow outfit that resembled a mechanic's and was rather giddy. "WOW! It's really you! Master Lan!" he said in glee.

Lan started at this. "M-Master? Me?" he stammered.

Just then, the boy's navi chimed in. He was red, and looked a bit like a car. "And that must be Megaman! Wow! Such clean lines! So simple! So perfect!" he gushed.

"Uh... Thanks, I think!" Megaman said sheepishly.

"Is this a friend of yours, Lan?" Mayl asked in curiosity.

"No, no! Never met him! Or have we?" he wondered. Something about this kid was pretty familiar, and not just because his future memories were blaring like a siren.

"I'm Kai Todoroki! You helped me during the bus incident six months ago!" the now-named Kai explained.

"I'm Kai's navi, Turboman! Thanks a lot for helping Kai!" Turboman. exe thanked.

"Six months ago? Bus incident?" Lan wondered, before remembering. "Oh yeah! I remember!"

"So do I! Remember when the traffic lights were out of control?" Megaman. exe reminded everyone.

"So you were on the bus? Well, you're looking good!" Lan complimented.

Kai beamed. "Thanks to you, Master Lan!"

Lan was a *tiny* bit uncomfortable with the praise. "Uh... Tell you what. Just call me Lan!" he insisted.

"Sure thing, Master Lan!" Kai proceeded to completely ignore him on that point.

"He's like a kid brother! Kai, you really like Lan that much?" Mayl wondered.

Turboman. exe explained for him. "We came here to meet him! Lan and Megaman are our heroes!"

"Yeah, our heroes!" Kai echoed.

"Hey, if you guys were on the bus, how come you didn't try to help?" Yai wondered.

At this, both of them grew sheepish. "We would have, but..." Turboman. exe started.

"Turboman was only a NormalNavi back then. I didn't customize him properly until a few weeks ago," Kai said sheepishly. (23)

"Really?" Lan blinked in surprise.

"Yeah! You should have seen it! We were fighting like normal, when he turned into some Style Change we'd never seen before! That's where I got the inspiration to turn him into Turboman!" Kai explained in pride.

"Well, I'd like to continue with this, but the tournament is still going on," Yai reminded them. "Mayl, your next match is with Mary. Lan, your next match is with Kai here!"

"Looking forward to it! Get ready, Kai!" Lan declared.

"I was born ready, Master Lan!" Kai cheered.

"Let's have a good time, Turboman!" Megaman. exe said in good sportsmanship.

"Time to put the pedal to the metal!" Turboman. exe exclaimed.

"And here we have the Blue Whirlwind, Megaman, versus the Red Roadster, Turboman! Who's going to win this match of the BattleChipGP? Battle routine, set!" Ribitta announced.

"Execute!" Megaman. exe declared.

"Time to burn rubber!" Turboman. exe said instead. In an opening move, he transformed into a car and zoomed forward at Megaman. exe. The Blue Bomber widened his eyes, leaping over the rampaging car. However, by the time he landed, Turboman. exe had veered around and was about to try to run him over again. Megaman. exe dodged again, but it was only by a hair. As he landed, he thought furiously of how to change this pattern.

Luckily, Lan had an idea. "Cars are great and all, but they need traction to work!" he declared.

That was when Megaman. exe got it. "Right behind you!" he said, summoning code rings around him. He shifted to a paler blue color, and his boots enlarged. "Style Change: AquaGround!" he declared. But he wasn't finished yet.

"Set Panel: Ice!" he exclaimed, stomping the ground. The panels flickered for a bit, before they became ice panels. The frictionless ice, true to the laws of nature that the Cyber World loved to mimic, proceeded to make Turboman. exe spin out of control.

"YAAAAAAAH!" he yelled in distress.

"Hang on, Turboman!" Kai called out. "Burner, BattleChip in!" he declared, slotting the Chip Data obtained from Fishy2 Viruses into his PET.

Turboman. exe immediately caught on fire. However, since he was causing it, he wasn't harmed. Unfortunately for Megaman. exe, the fire around Turboman. exe was enough to melt the ice panels under his tires. The Red Roadster immediately zoomed after Megaman. exe once again. Not only was he a rampaging car, but now he was on fire! And that's just terrible.

However, Megaman. exe wasn't out of it yet. Hastily disengaging the program that let him treat the ice as though it was normal panels, he slid away on the few remaining ice panels to get some breathing room. But Turboman. exe was still under the effects of Burner, so even if he reset the panels back to ice, his opponent would just melt them again. That was when Megaman. exe got another idea.

Turboman. exe was approaching, still on fire. Normally, the Blue Bomber wouldn't have enough time. But luckily, being in an aqua-element Style meant that he could do this easily. He readily charged his buster, shooting his attack.

"Bubbler!" he declared, shooting the Charged Shot version of a Shrimpy Virus's attack at Turboman. exe. The aqua-element attack hit the fire surrounding Turboman. exe and immediately evaporated into steam. Unfortunately for Turboman. exe, this meant that he could not see. At all.

He was forced to disengage and return to humanoid form. Before the steam could clear though, he heard something very unpleasant. "AreaGrab, AquaBlade, in and download!" Lan was heard declaring.

Turboman. exe immediately looked every which way, hoping to catch Megaman. exe's reappearance. Unfortunately, the steam was cloaking his vision, so he couldn't see more than a foot in front of him. When the steam finally cleared, he noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. Turboman. exe quickly spun and managed to deflect most of Megaman. exe's swing with the AquaBlade with his arm, only getting nicked slightly. Of course, since Turboman. exe was not actually a fire-element navi, it just did normal damage.

"Gh! Not bad, Master! But I'm not finished yet! Turbo Wheel!" Turboman. exe declared, shooting flaming wheels at Megaman. exe. The Blue Bomber simply deflected the wheels with his AquaBlade, but that was more than enough time for Kai to send Turboman. exe a FireBlade. The two navis proceeded to swing blades at each other, before finding themselves in a stalemate.

"You've put up a great fight, Turboman. But this fight is over! Pop-Up!" Megaman. exe declared, falling down a Hole.

"Huh?!" Turboman. exe asked in shock. And that one moment was all Megaman. exe needed.

"Hah!" he yelled, bursting up from the ground behind Turboman. exe and performing a spinning slash to the back. This knocked Turboman. exe clean across the battlefield, letting off sparks of damage.

"Gkh...Well done...Master Megaman," Turboman. exe weakly complimented, before being forced to log out.

"Turboman has logged out! Meaning that the winner is: Megaman!" Ribitta announced.

"Yes! Great job!" Lan cheered, even as the Blue Bomber reverted to Normal Style and logged out himself.

"Wow, Master Lan! That was amazing! I learned a lot from fighting you!" Kai gushed.

"Glad to hear it, Kai! Just, one thing..."

"Yes, Master Lan?"

"...Could you please stop calling me Master?"

"You got it, Master Lan!"

"...Sigh."

"Come young padawan, bring your navi and learn the ways of the Force!" Apollo intoned in a decent impression of a solemn tone.

"...Knowing how Yggdrasil works, that's probably going to happen at some point."

"Man, we've been seeing a lot of familiar faces lately, haven't we?" Lan mused.

"Most of them from the Gospel Incident. Airman, Quickman, even Raoul and Thunderman!" Hub listed.

"What's next, Freezeman?" Lan said rhetorically.

"Maybe," a voice rang out. Turning, Lan saw a familiar face walk up.

"Oh, hey! Sean!" Lan greeted. It was indeed Sean Obihiro, the former leader of Gospel.

"Lan," Sean nodded. "So, you two are our opponents for this round, huh?"

"Lan, our next opponent is Freezeman!" Hub stated right after Sean spoke.

"Huh? Wait, Sean, you're Freezeman's operator?" Lan asked in confusion.

"Yes, why do you ask? No, wait, don't tell me. You thought Freezeman was a solo navi, didn't you?" Sean asked wryly.

"Eheheh..." Lan rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

Sean shook his head in amusement, before turning serious. "Although...I question why I'm even in this tournament to begin with," he said.

Lan blinked in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Sean shook his head, before turning to the tournament board. "I may be reformed, but I'm still a former net criminal. I shouldn't have been invited to a large tournament like this, and neither should my former subordinates have. Not to mention the WWW operators in this tournament. Honestly, if it weren't for you and your father vouching for me, as well as my being a minor, I think I'd be behind bars right now," he commented.

"So, you think something's up," Lan surmised.

"I *know* something's up. Too many things about this tournament don't make sense. Why the convoluted match-ups? Why invite net criminals? Why has no one been able to fully explain anything about why this was set up? Your friend Yai is the sponsor, isn't she? Has she said anything?" Sean questioned.

Lan shook his head in the negative. He couldn't really use his future memories as evidence, after all, and even their reliability in this tournament was suspect. After all, he got the feeling he wasn't supposed to face Sean this early in the Tournament.

As for Sean himself, he sighed in disappointment. "Oh well. Let's let not let that get in the way of our match, shall we?"

Lan grinned despite himself. "Looking forward to it!"

"Oh, I've been waitin' so long to see if you can dance like me. You gon' sweat those nerves, can you dance fight like me. Now let me see. Ah ah ah, freeze! Like me, ooh!" (24)

"Sometimes I worry about your thought process..." Hephaestus sighed.

"Here's we have the Blue Whirlwind, Megaman, versus...*YAWN*...the Cool Customerz, Freezeman," Ribitta said, rather unenthusiastically and in a slurred voice.

"Hey, Ribitta? You alright?" Lan asked in concern. The frog-themed reporter and Operator of Toadman. exe immediately snapped out of it.

"Oh, I'm fine! Just...I've been doing this all day, and it's getting a bit late. This is actually the last match of the day," she said sheepishly.

"If that's the case, then we should wrap this up quickly, Lan," Sean suggested.

"Good idea," Lan nodded.

"Okay, who's going to win?! Battle routine, set!" Ribitta declared.

"Execute!" Both navis exclaimed. With that said, Freezeman. exe began with the match's opening move.

(25)

"IceStage!" he announced, setting all the panels to ice panels.

"Woah!" Megaman. exe yelped, almost falling over due to the lack of friction. Sean used this to his advantage.

"Now, Freezeman! IceTower, BattleChip in!" he declared, slotting the chip in. Freezeman. exe immediately punched the ground, sending the frozen version of AquaTower forward at the Blue Bomber.

"Hub, get out of there!" Lan yelled.

"Don't need to tell me twice!" Megaman. exe declared, summoning the Style Change code rings again. "Style Change: AquaCustom!" he declared, transforming into the new style. Like all aqua-element navis, Megaman. exe was now able to treat the ice panels as though

they were normal, and dashed away from the IceTower. But that sent him right into Freezeman. exe's trap.

"Not so fast! Freeze Cracker!" (26) the former Gospel navi declared, converting his arm into a Buster and shooting fast-moving snowflakes at the Blue Bomber.

"Aah!" Megaman. exe yelled as he was pelted by the shots of the Freeze Cracker.

"I don't remember that from last time we fought Freezeman!" Lan said in shock.

"You didn't suppose we'd just lie around doing nothing, did you?" Sean asked wryly. "I may still question why I'm in this tournament to begin with, but I'm still going to give it my all!" he declared.

Lan felt a grin creep up his mouth. "Right back atcha!" he declared.

"Lan, a little help?!" Megaman demanded, trying to dodge the Freeze Cracker shots.

"Coming your way! Hi-Cannon, double download!" Lan exclaimed, slotting the chips in.

Megaman. exe grinned at that, using the unique feature of Custom Styles to his advantage. "Program Advance: Omega Cannon 2!" he declared, firing off the cannon blasts.

Freezeman. exe widened his eyes in shock. But he knew what to do now. "Ice Shield!" he declared, freezing himself in a large crystal. Nonetheless, the cannon blasts slammed into the crystal, rupturing it the point of breaking.

"What was the point of that?" Lan wondered just as it was about to break.

"Heh. You forgot, didn't you?" Sean said with a smug look. Freezeman. exe's shield broke at that point, and out from the crystal

came an icy wind that sent Megaman flying clean across the comp space.

"Gah!" he yelled as he was slammed into the barrier at the edge.

"Heh. Now I see how you were able to defeat me last time we fought. But it's over now!" Freezeman. exe declared, lifting his arms up. "Icicle Fall!" he declared, sending cold air up above Megaman. exe. It condensed into several icicles that proceeded to drop directly on top of where he was. But Megaman. exe felt the chip data that Lan had sent him, and he knew it wasn't going to end the way Freezeman. exe thought it would.

"You're right, Freezeman, it is over. But not the way you think it is! AreaGrab!" Megaman. exe declared, before warping out of sight. Freezeman. exe widened his eyes, but it was too late for him to do anything.

"Program Advance: Evil Cut!" Megaman. exe exclaimed, warping behind Freezeman. exe and slashing with the three chips that made it up: StepSword, HeroSword, and StepCross. Freezeman. exe was launched clean across the arena, and was logged out before he could even hit the ground.

(27)

"Freezeman has logged out! The winner is: Megaman!" Ribitta declared. "Now, as a reminder, that was the last match of the day. What new exciting things will happen in the BattleChipGP tomorrow? Tune in to find out! This has been Ribitta from DNN News!"

"Great match, Sean! Let's do it again sometime!" Lan declared, shaking Sean's hand.

"Yeah. I had fun with this. Thanks, Lan," Sean said warmly.

"Don't mention it! *YAWN* But man, am I tired! I'm just going to go home and just fall into my bed," Lan commented before leaving. As

he did, he asked Megaman something. "Hey, Hub, the Metroline is still open right now, right?" he asked blearily.

Megaman. exe checked. "Uh...it closes in 15 minutes!" he said urgently.

"Wait, what?! Crap!" Lan yelled, before skating for the Metroline as fast as he could.

Meanwhile, Sean just shook his head in amusement at his friend's antics.

"No more transmitting your music into the Loop!" Hephaestus fumed as he threw the specialized cords into his desk drawer.

"The talented Apollo promises nothing brother," Apollo grinned serenely as he strummed out a few chords of *'Yakety Sax'* on his lyre to accompany Lan's mad dash for the Metroline.

The next morning, a certain someone had arrived at Beach Street's Metroline, ready for the next day of the tournament. *'No developments. Is it really the WWW behind this? Or is it just a smokescreen for something else?'* Chaud thought to himself.

"Lord Chaud, today's battles are about to begin," Protoman. exe pointed out.

Chaud started. This wasn't really the time to think about that. "Alright, Protoman! Let's get ready!" he declared.

"Yes, sir!"

'It doesn't really matter. We just have to win the tournament. Then whoever they are will show themselves to us.' With that thought in mind, Chaud walked to the DNN Station. However, one of the

vending machines shook oddly, almost as though something within was watching him...

Meanwhile, at SciLab, Yuichirou Hikari was hard at work, as he usually was. Right now, he was working on an idea that had struck him. Style Changes allowed navis to take on new forms depending on their fighting style, and were a great way for Operators to begin the basis for customizing them further. But what would happen if a navi were to develop a Style Change based on another navi? A sort of doubling, or rather a crossing of the abilities of both navis. It was an intriguing idea to be sure. *'And knowing our luck, Lan and Hub will probably need to use it for something if their normal Style Changes can't cut it,'* he thought to himself.

He went to pull up a file, but sighed when he realized that he'd left it in the house's mainframe. "Hey, can you go get the file I tried to pull up? I must have left it at home," he asked his navi, plugging his PET into the net.

"Of course, Doctor. But might I suggest you take a break? You've been burning both ends of the candle for a while now," his navi wryly pointed out, before departing for the Hikari home's mainframe.

Yuichirou sighed, shaking his head and rubbing his face. Admittedly, he had a point. Maybe he should take a break. Lan and Hub were participating in a NetBattle Tournament, weren't they? Maybe he could swing by there and see how they were doing. Yeah, that was a good idea! He went to pick up his PET and talk to his navi. "Hey–" he attempted to say, before his aide burst through the doors to his office.

"Dr. Hikari!" his aide called. Frowning in concern, Yuichirou put down his PET, sighing internally. Looked like he wasn't going to take that break after all.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked in concern.

"Navis have been appearing all over the net, causing havoc! The problem is, all of the navis causing problems are confirmed to be participating in a tournament on Beach Street today! It can't be them!" his aide reported.

'What? Are they imposters then? Or is it something else? A cloning project, like how Gospel tried to clone Bass?' the Hikari patriarch thought frantically. "Alright, get everyone together. I want all the data we have available on whatever's going on," Dr. Hikari said firmly.

"Yes sir!" his aide said, before rushing to call everyone together.

Yuichirou sighed again. "Sorry, Lan and Hub, guess I won't be coming to that tournament," he muttered to himself. He Logged his navi out, before heading after his aide.

"Another day, another match!" Lan said, walking up Beach Street.

"I wonder who we're going to fight today? After all, the tournament is about halfway finished," Hub mused.

"Doesn't matter who it is, we're still going to win!" Lan declared. Suddenly, his PET started ringing.

"Lan, it's your phone!" Hub exclaimed.

"Hello?" Lan said into the microphone.

"Lan, it's me."

"Dad! What's up?" Lan wondered.

"I didn't want to disturb you while you were in the middle of your tournament, but I need to tell you something. Navis have been showing up all over the net and attacking randomly. The problem is, is that they seem to be some of the navis that are participating in the BattleChipGP," Yuichirou hurriedly explained.

"Huh?! But that's impossible!" Lan said in shock.

"I know. The navis were confirmed to be in two places at once. But these copies had the same powers as the originals. Lan, this seems a lot like Gospel's plan to clone Bass. Has Sean said anything about his old notes going missing?" Dr. Hikari questioned.

"No. He was pretty normal when I met him yesterday," Lan remembered.

"I see. Then it's probably something different then. Anyway, don't worry. SciLab has this under control. You two just focus on your tournament. I'll try to stop by home this afternoon."

"Alright. See ya, Dad!" Lan said, before hanging the phone up.

"Navi clones... this seems familiar from somewhere," Hub mused.

"Now that you mention it, it does. But where from?" Lan wondered.

"Well, we're not going to find out here. Dad's right, we should just go ahead with the tournament for now," Hub pointed out.

Lan sighed. "Alright. Just, I'm getting a bad feeling from this," he admitted, before skating off to the TV Station.

"Thumb pricking... thumb pricking... Bro, where did you put the commands for causing mortal thumb pricking?"

"Where I was sure you wouldn't find them."

"But... Something wicked comes the mighty Lan and Megaman's way! Thumb pricking is traditional!"

"Something wicked is *always* coming their way," Hephaestus rolled his eyes.

"Hey, the board actually looks fairly legible now!" Lan said in shock.

"Looks like there's only 10 more rounds until the finals," Hub said carefully, looking over the board.

'Was it supposed to be this short? Anyway...' "No offense to everyone else, but Chaud is definitely going to be in the finals. We can't lose here, Hub!" Lan declared.

"I won't let you down, Lan!" his brother said in return.

"Lan!"

Lan turned to see Sean stalk up, and he wasn't happy. "Sean! I guess Dad told you, huh?" Lan guessed.

"You guessed right. Tsk! SciLab's called me in. Looks like I'll have to drop out of the tournament," Sean said angrily.

Lan winced. "That bites," he said in sympathy.

"Yeah. Anyway, Lan, I've been getting a bad feeling about this, so I want you to have these," Sean said, handing him four BattleChips. Lan took the proffered BattleChips, and widened his eyes when he saw the images on them.

"Sean, what are–?!" he asked in shock.

"Data recovered from the Gospel Bug Beast, condensed into BattleChips. Something tells me you may need them. Just a head's up though, they're all Giga-class chips," Sean explained.

"...Thanks, Sean. I hope I won't have to use them though," Lan said uneasily, putting them in his pocket.

"Trust me, I hope you don't either. Well, I better get going. Hopefully, I'll see you soon, Lan." And with that, Sean departed for the Metroline to SciLab.

Lan looked seriously at him as he left. "Just what is going on? I don't remember this being in the BattleChipGP!" he complained to Hub.

"Neither do I. Something must have happened. But what?" Hub wondered.

"...I guess the only thing we can do now is hurry up with the tournament," Lan decided.

"Our next opponents are Miyu and Skullman," Hub said quietly.

"Better get going then," Lan decided, walking for the battlecomp.

"Well, Miyu and Skullman were nice to see again," Hub said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Yeah, I guess," Lan said morosely.

"Lan, what's wrong?" Hub asked in concern.

"It's just...I can't stop thinking about this thing that's going on on the net. I didn't even know this was going to happen!" Lan exclaimed.

"We didn't know any of the things that happened were going to happen the first time around," Hub pointed out.

"But we should have known! We knew generally what was going to happen for everything else, why didn't we know about this?!" Lan said in a distraught tone.

"Lan, nobody can know everything. Things just happened the way they did. All we can do is just face it like we always have! Together!" Hub said firmly.

"...You're right. Okay, let's just get the tournament over with so we can help out with this," Lan decided.

"Alright. Our next opponent is..." Hub trailed off, before realizing who it was. "Lan. I think you may have been wrong about not knowing what was going on," Hub said numbly.

Lan blinked, before noticing just who his opponent was. "Shuuichi Eboshi. The Operator of Hatman," he whispered. (28) Things suddenly clicked into place for both of them.

"Then that means that those strange navi copies on the net are Phantom Navis!" Hub realized.

"Meaning that the one responsible is Cache! But this soon?" Lan wondered.

"I wonder why Cache is attacking this soon. We didn't face him last time until...until..." Hub got a strange look on his face. "Lan, when *did* we fight Cache?" he asked.

"Um...it was...it was...I don't remember when we fought him. What's going on?" Lan wondered, with a weird look on his face. Hub wondered too, but then he noticed the time.

"Lan, it's time for the match. With Sean having dropped out, there are only seven more rounds not including this one," Hub pointed out.

Lan sighed. "Alright, let's go," he said, walking to the NetBattle machine.

"The mighty Lan raises an excellent question, when did they fight this Cache person?"

"I'm not sure, actually," Hephaestus answered. "I suspect sometime after their next adventure, but it's one of two series of events in this section whose actual place in baseline progression has been damaged."

"Thank you all for agreeing to this meeting so quickly. I know how important everyone's duties are, so I'll make this brief," Yuichirou said in SciLab's meeting room.

"As most of you know already, strange navi clones have been appearing all over the net and wreaking havoc. The purpose of this meeting is to find a way to figure out what they are, and how to stop them," his aide said to the room.

"Has anyone been able to communicate with these navis?" a female scientist who worked with the Virus Breeder questioned.

"Not as yet. I've sent my own navi to investigate. We should be hearing from him soon," Dr. Hikari mentioned. The entire room shifted at that. Dr. Hikari had started using a PET and navi again only recently. Which was great! But they did have to question his choice of navi...

"Any luck?" Yuichirou asked into his PET. There was a brief pause, before the sound of twin Charged Buster shots and a Sonic Boom rang out.

"They don't seem willing to talk," his navi reported. "Although curiously, it seems any attack, no matter how much damage is done, is enough to cause them to vanish. But more and more are appearing," the navi said ominously. This was helped by his rather low voice.

"Alright, keep at it. Remember, if you're running low on HP, jack out," Dr. Hikari said.

"Acknowledged, Doctor." And with that, the link was temporarily shut off again.

"So, they vanish in one hit? Kind of like phantoms," his aide mused.

"Well, obviously, they can be fought. But where are they coming from that they can respawn like this?" one of the scientists in charge of

the Mother Computer wondered.

"That's what we're here to find out. Can anyone suggest any way of tracking down where these 'Phantom Navis' are coming from?" Dr. Hikari asked sharply. The discussion in the room started reaching its peak as the scientists discussed back and forth about what to do.

'I hope you're having a better time, Lan and Hub,' Yuichirou thought to himself.

The rest of the matches came and went almost preternaturally fast to Lan. But now it was time for the final match. The match he had been waiting for this entire tournament. And yet, he couldn't enjoy it the way he wanted to. How could he when he was worrying about what was going on in the net? One look at Chaud told him that his rival was also preoccupied. But they both knew that they had to finish this before they could deal with the real problem. So they were going to give it their all regardless.

"Welcome to the final match of the BattleChipGP!" Ribitta announced. "This is a match a long time in the making. Our two finalists are the Blue Whirlwind duo of Megaman and Lan Hikari, and the Red Lightning duo of Protoman and Eugene Chaud! These two rival teams have waited a long time for this, ever since their bout in the N1 Grand Prix was cancelled! Who will triumph over the other? Only this match will know! Battle routine, set!"

"Execute!" Megaman. exe and Protoman. exe both declared, before launching into battle.

"MegaBuster!" Megaman. exe declared, firing away at Protoman. exe with buster shots. But Protoman. exe summoned his ProtoShield on his right arm, blocking the shots fired. And then, even though he was continually being peppered with MegaBuster shots, he dashed forward, shield first, to attack Megaman. exe. But Megaman. exe leaped over his sword swing into the air, charging his Buster the entire time.

"Charged Shot!" he declared, firing directly at Protoman. exe's shield. This forced Protoman. exe's guard wide open, letting Megaman. exe fall into a flying kick that impacted the Red Raider in the head. Megaman. exe leaped off Protoman. exe and backflipped back onto his feet. However, Protoman. exe had recovered before he did so. He dashed up and slashed at Megaman. exe with his ProtoSword, knocking the Blue Bomber back 5 feet.

"Protoman, we're ending this here! StepSword: Triple Download!" Chaud declared.

"Oh no you don't! StepSword: Triple Download!" Lan echoed. The two of them slotted in their Chips at the same time.

"Program Advance: Zeta Step 1!" both navis declared. The two of them then vanished, warping all over the field and clashing swords. It seemed like it was going to be pretty even. But suddenly, the whole battlecomp started shaking.

"Huh?! I don't remember this in the memo!" Ribitta said in shock. That signified to both Lan and Chaud that this wasn't part of the tournament, meaning that something else was interfering. Chaud had a hunch he knew what.

"Protoman, cease fighting! It looks we've found our man," Chaud said grimly. The Red Raider and Blue Bomber ceased their combat, turning to the source of the net's shaking. It abruptly stopped when a navi teleported in. He was completely white with almost no other color on him, save his red eyes and two red rings around spikes that jutted from his head. There were also spikes jutting from his shoulders. He also had a cold smirk on his face. His Navi Mark resembled a circle that had a 'C' inside of it.

Protoman. exe moved his ProtoSword on his left arm in the general direction of this newcomer. "Identify yourself," he ordered.

"The name's Cache. I've been waiting for this moment, Megaman and Protoman," the now-identified Cache said, his eyes glowing red.

"Hi, I'm Cache and I'm so overconfident that I don't care how blatantly evil I look."

Hephaestus raised an eyebrow and smirked. "I wasn't aware you'd changed your name."

"Wha... that..." Apollo sputtered before narrowing his eyes and glaring. "The grievously injured Apollo reluctantly grants you a point."

"How generous of you..." Hephaestus deadpanned, though he couldn't stop smirking.

Meanwhile in Beach Street's net area, Dr. Hikari's navi fought through the hordes of Phantom Navis, slashing away at them with his signature 3-hit combo. But despite them falling with one hit, more and more kept coming. "Tch. Is this my end?" he said fatalistically. He shook his head to snap himself out of it. No, it wasn't. It couldn't be. He had an operator now. He was a real navi. He owed it to those two who had given him this chance to keep fighting!

But just as he had refocused his resolve, the Phantom Navis suddenly stopped, heading off for one specific area. The navi swore as he contacted his Operator. "Dr. Hikari, the Phantom Navis are heading toward the TV Station's network," he reported.

"The TV Station...no, Lan and Hub are there today! Then, the Phantom Navis are after them?! Go after them, quick!" his NetOp ordered in a panic.

"Acknowledged," his navi said, dashing off after them.

Lan gritted his teeth as Cache revealed his plan. He had gotten wind of the BattleChipGP and had decided to add the powers of the two strongest navis to his own. So he bided his time, and then when the

final day of the tournament occurred, he sent his Phantom Navis out to distract the Officials watching so he could absorb the finalists.

"There's no way I'm letting you have Megaman!" Lan yelled.

"The same for me. You're not getting Protoman!" Chaud declared.

"What you want to happen is of no consequence. I'll just *take* them regardless!" Cache exclaimed. Suddenly, data flew in from the link to Beach Street's network. This was from the Phantom Navis that had been in all over the net. The data converged on Cache, letting off a flash of light that briefly blinded Megaman. exe and Protoman. exe. When they recovered their vision, they were shocked to see how different Cache was.

He was giant-sized, at least three times their height, with black down his midsection. His legs were gone, and it looked like he had fused with the floor. His torso was much bulkier now. His Navi Mark had also disappeared. **"Now, it's lunch time!"** Cache declared. (29)

Lan turned to Chaud. "Chaud, we can't let this guy beat us! We've got to work together!" he declared.

"As much as it pains me, you're right. Protoman, let's go!" Chaud ordered.

"Battle routine, set!" Lan declared.

"Execute!" Megaman. exe said decisively.

"Let's go!" Protoman. exe said. The two navis immediately dashed forward at Cache's form, ready to end this.

"But a battle such as this demands epic music!" Apollo struggled to hook his backup set of cords up.

"Don't you *dare* !" Hephaestus growled from where he had Apollo in a headlock.

"...The amazing Apollo will make you a deal. Let the sensational Apollo do it this one more time and you have his word that it will be the last."

"...Oh, fine."

As they ran forward, Megaman. exe peppered Cache's form with Buster shots. Cache didn't appreciate that, and brought down one of his giant fists to attempt to squish his opponents. Megaman. exe was forced to leap backwards, while Protoman. exe jumped onto the arm. The Red Raider dashed up the arm before Cache could react, slashing at his face.

"GRRAAAAAAH!" Cache roared. Protoman. exe was forced to leap off of him as Cache thrashed around in a rage. Cache's shoulder spikes then retracted and fired off all kinds of ammo. Cannon blasts, Metal Blades, Rolling Cutters, any and all kinds of projectiles. The rain of projectiles and ammo flew at the two on the ground. Protoman. exe dashed forward using his shield as a cover, but Megaman. exe was stuck where he was, desperately trying to avoid the hail of projectiles.

'Gah! I can't avoid all of these projectiles like this! I'm stuck! I need more speed!' he desperately thought. However, that was when the chng. bat inside him reacted. It was already reacting to his recent fighting style, and this was the final push it needed.

Unbeknownst to him, Megaman. exe's form shifted to a form more suitable for what he wanted as well as how he was fighting. His leg armor was reformatted to hold wheels. His form in general was more armored. He gained chest armor that resembled the hood of a car, complete with wheels behind his shoulders. Oh, and the armor was green in color.

More projectiles zoomed at him. Instinctively, Megaman. exe *blurred* away from the projectiles, much to his shock. "Wait, how did-?" he wondered, looking at himself.

"A new Style Change? Now?" Lan said in shock. Meanwhile, a certain member of the audience spoke up.

"That's the Style Change I customized Turboman out of!" Kai exclaimed in surprise.

"It's wood-element...so this is WoodTurbo Style?" Megaman. exe wondered. He was interrupted when Cache fired an energy beam at him, which Protoman. exe was forced to block for him.

"Get your head in the game! You can admire yourself later!" the Red Raider admonished.

"Uh, right!" Megaman. exe decided. The wheels on his new form started spinning, and he zoomed off from Protoman. exe's guard. Cache tried to take advantage of this by firing tons of stuff at him. Elec Beams, Magnet Missiles, even a few Cannonballs. But Megaman dodged all of them, zooming around Cache's form and firing the signature Tornado Buster of Wood Styles.

"GRAAHH! You little pests!" Cache roared. He charged up energy, and fired continuous laser blasts from his mouth at the attacking duo. While Megaman. exe was able to use WoodTurbo's speed to dodge it easily, Protoman. exe had more problems. He blocked the attacks to the best of his ability, but eventually one blast clipped the tip of his shield, knocking it away from shielding him. This let Cache's next blast catch him clean in the midsection, knocking him back and into the ground.

"Protoman!" Chaud yelled.

"One more ought to do it!" Cache declared, firing another blast at the downed Protoman. exe.

"NO!" Megaman. exe yelled in horror, using all his speed to get in front of Protoman. exe. But not even WoodTurbo's speed could help him block correctly in that scenario. Megaman. exe took the blast fully unprotected, kicking up an explosion.

"Hub, no!" Lan yelled in horror. The smoke cleared to reveal an unconscious Megaman. exe, now back in his base form.

Hephaestus swore and began frantically examining code for the best way to ensure that the co-Anchor survived this. If he died here and now... Well, he could technically try again, but it–

Hephaestus's mild panic attack was derailed as a particular piece of data caught his eye.

"Did... did the overall success chance actually go *up* from that?"

"Lan, jack him out!" Chaud hurriedly said.

"I can't! It's jammed!" Lan said in desperation.

"Heheh...one down," Cache said sinisterly, turning his attention to the recovering Protoman. His rationale was that beating both of them and then absorbing them would be better than beating and absorbing one at a time.

"Tch! Looks like we have no choice!" Chaud said in anger.

"Lord Chaud, do you mean...?!" Protoman. exe asked in shock.

(30)

"Yes. Protoman, it's time to show everyone the power we worked so hard to attain! Initiate Style Change!" Chaud declared.

"Yes sir!"

Rings of code formed around Protoman. exe, much to everyone's shock. "Wait, since when did Protoman have a Style Change?!" Lan asked in confusion. Chaud let a small grin grow on his face at the complete gobsmacked look on Lan's face.

Back with Protoman. exe, his left arm's ProtoSword shut off, giving him both hands. His armor, save for his helmet, turned into cloth, and became more flowing. An actual physical sword, scabbard and all, formed on Protoman. exe's right.

"Style Change: Muramasa Style!" Protoman declared, drawing his sword.

"No mere Style Change can defeat me!" Cache boasted, rearing back a fist to punch Protoman. exe. He lunged at the Red Raider and shot off his punch...only to get his entire hand slashed off by Protoman. exe's sword.

"GAAAAAH! How...How?!" Cache said in anger and pain.

"Didn't you listen? I said Muramasa Style. In other words, my sword is essentially Muramasa itself! It grows in strength as I take damage!" Protoman. exe declared. He then raised his sword. "Now come get some!" he yelled, leaping at Cache. Cache roared yet again, firing a multitude of attacks at Protoman. exe. Muramasa Style had disabled his Shield, so Protoman. exe blocked with just the Muramasa sword. He did a good job of it too, but he still got nicked over and over again. And while Protoman. exe's attack power went up the more his HP went down, there was also a point where he wouldn't be able to fight anymore.

Lan realized this, and knew he had to do something, even with Hub out of commission. "Chaud!" At that, his rival turned toward him. "Here, use this!" Lan said hurriedly, giving Chaud one of the Chips he had received from Sean.

Chaud widened his eyes when he saw what he had been given. "Lan, what is-?!" he asked, before Lan cut him off.

"Sean gave it to me this morning, because he had a really bad feeling about things. It's Giga-class," Lan hurriedly explained.

"Right, good thing I have a way around that problem," Chaud said mysteriously, before turning back to his PET. "Protoman, get ready! FireGospel, Giga Chip in!" he declared, slotting the BattleChip in.

Protoman. exe immediately stopped guarding, ignoring the shots he was peppered with. "Burn!" he yelled. The Gospel Bug Beast's head formed on his right arm, and breathed out a breath of fire that ran all the way up Cache.

Cache was in pain, and blinded. Even still, his hearing still worked, and he didn't like what he heard next.

"Protoman, finish him!" Chaud declared.

"Yes sir! Muramasa Style:" Protoman intoned, before vanishing. And then Cache was lit up in pain as Protoman attacked.

"Delta!" One slash.

"Ray!" A second slash.

"EDGE!" A third slash. Protoman reappeared in front of Cache, his back turned. Suddenly, the triangular Greek letter Delta appeared over Cache's form.

(31)

"You're finished," Protoman. exe said coldly, just as Cache started to explode from the damage he'd taken. The Delta Ray Edge was truly a potent attack, its chip form being classed as Giga. Of course, as the originator of the attack, Protoman. exe didn't need a chip for it.

"D-Damn you...DAMN YOU, PROTOMAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!" Cache yelled, before exploding! But the backlash had damaged the comp space too

much, and it too was starting to fall apart. Just then, Megaman. exe came back to the land of the awake.

"Gurr...what's going on?" he wondered, clutching his head.

"No time! Hub, jack out!" Lan said in concern.

"Protoman, jack out!" Chaud echoed.

"Err, roger!"

"Yes, sir!"

Just as they did so, a certain other navi looked on. "Looks like you didn't need my help this time, my friend. I'll have to find another way to start to repay the debt I owe you," he commented, before jacking out to Dr. Hikari's PET.

"Okay, everything checks out normal," Yuichirou said, having finished his scans of Hub to make sure nothing was wrong with him after the battle with Cache.

"How're you feeling, Hub?" Lan asked in concern.

"I'm fine, Lan! I'll admit Cache got me good, but I'm a-okay now!" Hub reassured him.

"Although, something worries me," Yuichirou pondered.

"What do you mean, Dad?" Lan wondered.

"No navi has ever had *nine* different Style Changes before. The usual maximum is two, and they're generally complementary Styles and elements. You may be a lot different from other navis, Hub, but it's a bit worrying," their father admitted.

"But, Dad, I feel fine," Hub protested.

"I know you do, but humor me," Yuichirou said patiently. At his sons' nods, he continued. "Unless you absolutely have to use a Style Change, I want you to deactivate chng. bat. This will check the formation of new Style Changes, and lower the risk of compromising your core program. Okay?"

"...Alright."

Eugene Chaud was not in a good mood. The simple fact that they had been forced to utilize Muramasa Style during the whole thing with Cache didn't sit well with him. It had all the hallmarks of a bad omen. "Protoman, make a note. We're increasing our training time from 10 hours to 11 hours per day."

"Yes sir. By the way, we've received an e-mail from the Officials who were tasked with investigating the origins of the BattleChipGP. Apparently it was an attempt by certain elements in SciLab and the Officials themselves to lure Bass in and contain him," Protoman. exe reported.

"Fools. What did they hope to accomplish by luring *him* in with no regard for the populace? The fact that it was that Cache character instead only furthers drives the point home. And besides, how could anyone hope to contain him?" Chaud said rhetorically.

"Well, Mary, it's been a fun week," Yai said to her homestay friend. Mary was packing for the trip back to Netopia.

"I've had fun too. Although that thing during the finals was a bit scary, I'm glad they were able to solve the whole thing," Mary said with a small smile.

"Yeah! Protoman was awesome!" Ring. exe cheered. Just then, Mary's PET started beeping. "You got mail, Mary! It's from your folks. ...NO WAY!" Ring. exe gasped in shock.

"Ring, what is it?" Mary asked in concern.

"Your parents talked it over, and agreed to let you stay here for the whole school year!" Ring. exe hurriedly said.

"Really?!"

Mayl looked up at the sky from the ACDC Park bench. *'Lan and Megaman have gotten so much stronger, but not even they could stand up to that Cache guy,'* she thought to herself. She made her decision there.

"Roll?"

"Yeah, Mayl?"

"...We need to get stronger."

"Alright, Gutsman, it's time for us to get stronger!" Dex proclaimed in his room.

"Sounds like a plan, Dex! One question. How?" Gutsman. exe wondered.

"Simple! You're already perfect enough as it is, Gutsman! You're just missing one thing!"

"What's that?"

"A long range attack! Once we have that, we won't lose to Lan and Megaman again!"

"Yeehaw! Well if that's the case, then sign me up!"

Meanwhile, in the depths of the undernet, a forgotten flyer for the BattleChipGP flew on the digital wind. That is, until a certain cloaked

figure caught it. "BattleChipGP? Hmph. Not worth my time," Bass. exe pronounced, before going deeper into the undernet. He had found an interesting source of power down there. And he wanted it. (32)

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1) This part by DalekDavros, lead-in by me. *'Two Futures'* is the translated name of the second japanese opening theme song for the Battle Network anime.

www. youtube watch? v=w-aUClP0mfo

2) He doesn't have a mouth. Also, Megaman. exe vs Flashman. exe portion by OathToOblivion

3) I've been watching RoahmMythril's Let's Plays to refamiliarize myself with Battle Network's events. I think he's rubbed off on me…

4) Of all the runarounds in the Battle Network series, I personally found Bubbleman. exe's to be the most *bleep*ing annoying. So, yeah, I'm venting just a bit here.

Bonus quip by Scorntex: Guess Bubbleman. exe's bubble... *just got burst* . (YYEEEAAAHHHH!)

5) See Apollo for my reaction to this particular event.

6) This is my nod to a rather popular fan theory based on some impressive fridge logic regarding Mamoru and the navi in question.

7) Inspired in part by a snip that cj304 wrote that didn't quite fit with the activation Loop, but will be included in a later compilation. If you think Plantman. exe's having a bad day *now* ...

8) Take notes. There will be a quiz later. ;P

9) In my original draft I misspelled this as 'dowsed'. Which I thought was rather amusing in this context when one of the pre-readers on

Spacebattles pointed it out.

10) Hold on a moment... I've got something in my eye...

11) During Chisao's earlier visit, Lan and Hub declined to let Dex and Gutsman. exe win their match. Chisao threw a tantrum as expected, but Dex redeemed himself as a cool big brother by saving Chisao's life during Beastman. exe's attack on the zoo. As well as learning a lesson about not making boasts that weren't true just to make himself look good.

12) My Little Gutsman: Friendship is Pounding The Hell Out of Bad Guys.

13) The kawarimi technique is not unique to Naruto's universe. Most branches that have ninja also have a version of it.

Also: This portion by OathToOblivion

14) Who says Lan can't learn?

15) It's not so much that Lan doesn't think they can take care of themselves, it's that there's a pretty big chance of someone getting hurt and he'd prefer it wasn't them.

16) And probably enjoying a few of the administered beatdowns a bit more than was strictly healthy.

17) Serenade. exe actually is referred to as female in the original japanese text if I recall correctly.

18) It's true! The way certain monarchy laws were/are written, kings can in fact be female.

19) The memes made me do it!

20) I suspect that it's advised that navis not do their own customization, but since in one of the games you actually get the

Humor program from a navi who *currently has it installed and doesn't want it* , I'm certain it's possible.

21) Almost all of the Battle Chip GP segment (essentially everything but the cutscenes with Hephaestus and Apollo) was written by OathToOblivion. Bless you Oath.

22) Mary, a quiet introvert, customized her navi as a cheerful extrovert. Think about that for a moment.

23) Not sure if this is ever declared in canon, but it makes sense regardless.

24) Adapted from lyrics of *'Freeze'* by T Pain.

25) START THE MUSIC (chosen by OathToOblivion):

www. youtube watch? feature=player_embedded&v=kYV_NrOgAjI

26) OathToOblivion: Surprisingly, Freezeman. exe didn't have an analogue of the original Freeze Man's Freeze Cracker. Of course, that didn't stop me from giving it to him anyway.

27) MUSIC STOPS HERE.

28) Don't know who this is? Hatman. exe and his operator are both from the cell phone games. Hatman. exe is themed like a stage magician.

29) OathToOblivion: Meanwhile, in another Loop completely unrelated to the Megaverse, one Nitoh Kosuke, Kamen Rider Beast, felt as though he was getting ripped off.

30) START THE MUSIC (chosen by OathToOblivion):

www. youtube watch? feature=player_embedded&v=5aKQF7y2vLQ

31) MUSIC STOPS HERE.

32) What did Bass. exe find? Stay tuned as I tackle the mess that is Battle Network 4 and 5, next time on the Mega Loops!

The Twelve Loops of Christmas

AN: Just a note, but I originally planned to have Battle in the Network done in time to post this (yeah, I'm only just finishing up adapting BN4 as of this posting, so you can see how well that worked) so some of these will logically take place after it finishes. Anyway, on with the snippets!

For the Twelve Loops of Christmas, my readers gave to me:

12.12 (From Leonite)

Twelve Synchro Chips.

Christmas. A time for celebration. A time for you to enjoy what you have with family and friends. A time that one Lan Hikari, sometimes known as Hikari Netto, enjoyed each and every loop. Even so he always felt cautious at this time of year as he walked through the bustling city. Someone or another with a point to prove, villains or not, tended to come out of the woodwork at this time of year.

"Are you ok Lan?"

Hub Hikari, sometimes known as Hikari Saito, understood the feelings of his brother and net op. This loop had been good so far and still had plenty to go. A variant that leaned towards the anime they saw in the Hub Loop, the two were still the brothers that they were used to and nothing would take that away from them. Duo and Regal had been stopped recently and Bass had vanished with a promise to have one final bout with the two. It was a request that could be interesting to answer on occasion for a challenge, but for now nothing major was going on.

"It's this time of year Hub, you know that." Lan replied. He looked across the city as the sun starts to sink in the sky and the electrical advertisements become all the brighter. "As much as I want to relax, you never know when some whackjob is going to pop up."

As if on cue, each and every one of the advertisements suddenly turned blank... and then were replaced by the image of a man with spiked hair appeared. Across his face was a single scar... and one of his eyes was covered by hair.

Mayl had been out doing some last minute Christmas shopping when the advertisements changed. Instead of shrinking back she slowly reached for her PET. It was obvious what the man was about to do but she still wanted to be prepared.

"People of DenTech City. My name is Xander Payne. I am a man with a vision."

Raika growled even as he prepared to jack Searchman in. He had come into the country on a recently completed mission and had hoped to meet up with Lan Hikari, to at the least wish him a happy holiday season. He knew exactly who this Xander Payne was, and if he was making such a forward decree then he clearly had a plan in progress.

"As you have seen the world has been devastated again and again recently. Not by the hands of flesh and blood, but by those made of data."

Charlie frowned as Tesla crossed her hands. The two had been meeting up for a bit of a pleasant meal. A meal now ruined by the presence of some nutter with way too much power. Of course they had Gyroman and Magnetman respectively with them (Tesla didn't trust the latter in her father's hands), but they both knew that simply pinpointing the location wasn't the sort of task they were suited for.

"The new internet was brought into the world to help advance it... and when it did, we found our viruses became stronger than ever. So we made avatars to fight back against them."

Ms. Yuri resisted the urge to growl even as Ms. Mari looked at the image on every television at the moment. She knew Xander's group only from hearsay and from what Regal had called them: Madmen. Given Regal's own low standards this put her on edge

"And yet these NetNavis, these creations of the Hikari family, have caused nothing but trouble for the world. They say they are for our benefit, but just how recently was it that the world was almost destroyed by a NetNavi?"

From the shadows a figure watched. Dark Miyabi had been approached to be hired by the group Xander represented before and he had turned it down. He had suspected what they had in mind was a bit more extreme than they had suggested... and he was right.

"That is why me and my Emerald Spears are here, to help you all realize that the net as it is, and NetNavis, need to be destroyed."

Chaud glared. Protoman could understand his operator's anger. While it was true many people had done harm with NetNavis, just as much good had been done and some people even relied on them for their well being.

"While regrettable that we must push things so far, for our own safety it's necessary. Flesh is worth more than what advantages data can provide to us."

Dingo gripped his fist... only for Fyrefox to clasp a hand on his shoulder and shake his head. It wouldn't do them any good to lose control of their temper at a time like this. Not when they could figure

out something to do to help. The two had been hanging about for a gathering of friends with Lan, but by the looks of things plans had changed.

"We have taken over SciLab. Soon the entirety of DenTech City will be enlightened as to the destruction that these beasts can cause."

Meddy noticed Jasmine had fallen unusually silent. And she knew why. The two had come for the celebration with Lan and friends, before they'd head home for the holidays. The fact that there was yet another villain was a problem. The fact that it was at Sci Lab meant Lan was going to get involve. Meddy knew that Jasmine was already reaching into her pockets for a familiar chip.

"If, after an hour, we do not have confirmation that there will be a public move to destroy all NetNavis, then we'll start killing the hostages we've taken."

As the screen shifted, Lan gasped. The view had shifted and showed Yuchiro Hikari on screen.

"And we'll start with the most directly responsible person. Yuchiro Hikari. You have 1 hour DenTech. Dimensional Area activate."

"Synchro Chip in and download!"

"Why?"

Xander Payne turned around and looked at Dr. Yuichiro Hikari. "Why what, Yuichiro?"

"Rush Synchro Chip in and download!"

Yuichiro glared. "You know exactly what I'm talking about." He noted "You were one of my best scientists. You were integral on developing the Synchro Chip. Of all people here besides me and Mr. Famous, you should know the most about them. And yet after that one time-"

"A certain attack that left me... enlightened as to how the world needs to be." Xander replied. "And you don't need to dance around it. You're asking why I've lured your son and the net savior Chaud here."

"Cross Fusion!"

A brief moment of silence. And then... "That is your plan, isn't it?" Yuichiro asked.

"Ah, I could never get anything past you. But yes. This is all for... a demonstration."

It hadn't been more than 10 minutes since the announcement. 10 minutes of Lan, or more accurately CF Megaman rushing for his life towards Sci-Lab. Only stopping along the way to destroy the viruses that had taken advantage of such an open gateway into the real world. If this wasn't contained fast, if it wasn't stopped fast, then not only would people be hurt or worse, but the power drain would start to become obvious. As much as they liked to refine the system it still drained a lot of power to use which was why it was rarely used for more than 5 or 10 minutes at a time. And yet both Lan and Hub knew in their hearts their desperation was more... focused than that. On their father. On the fact that they had heard from Rock and Roll as to just how far the madman was willing to go in their baseline. They wouldn't lose their father like Rock and Roll had almost lost theirs.

As he came up to Sci-Lab Lan skidded to a halt. "Alright... I've got the battle chip data ready." Lan said.

"We should be ready for anything though Lan." Megaman pointed out. "After all..."

"Right, who knows what they have inside." Lan replied.

"Actually, we do."

Lan blinked then turned around... and was stunned. Those who stood before him were Mayl, Miyabi and Raika as CF Roll, Shadowman and Searchman respectively. "You didn't really think we'd let you do this alone did you Lan?" Raika asked.

"You do tend to rush into things surprisingly often." Dark Miyabi noted.

Mayl just held up a fist. "Besides, I know your dad and want to see him safe as much as you do." She explained, a determined grin more at home on Lan's own face on hers.

"And there's no need to worry about aerial recon!" Lan looked up and could help but smile as Charlie and Tesla, as CF Gyroman and Magnetman, landed in front of them. "Me and my darling Tesla scouted out the roof, they haven't posted any guards up there." Charlie said.

"Pretty lax for an evil organization if you ask me." Tesla added. "And after seeing a speech like that I knew there was no way I could convince Charlie to do anything but help you out, so I thought I'd come along and have some fun."

"And to teach them how to actually fight, huh Tesla?" Ms. Yuri asked as she emerged from a nearby alley as CF Needleman. "I'm honestly here because they're trying to ruin Christmas for my sister, but getting to help out a few friends is always nice."

"I think that's supposed to be our line!" A louder voice cried out. Soon enough the group swelled again as Fyrefox landed in with his jets flaring and Jasmine on his back, as CF Napalmman and CF Meddy

respectively. Soon enough Dingo and Chaud, as CF Tomahawkman and CF Protoman, landed beside them.

"Like we'd let you go through this without us." Jasmine noted. "You're going to need all the help you can get if this group is dangerous."

Dingo grinned. "Plus, who else are you going to have break the door down but me and Tomahawkman." He bragged.

"Please, me and Napalmman could get that done so much faster." Fyrefox dismissed, but still grinned.

"We all owe you at least once over Lan... it's time we did something to help you out." Chaud added. "Beyond letting you be in TV ads."

"Wait Lan's in your TV ads?" Jasmine asked.

Mayl giggled. "Remind me about that when we're done here, he looks so funny dressing up in this sort of savage man-"

"And that's enough of that!" Lan interrupted... but despite himself, despite the odds, he couldn't help but grin. "Everyone... thank you. Are you sure though?"

Raika nodded. "My intelligence indicates that the Emerald Spears have deployed navis into the real world, as well as controlled viruses. None of them seem to be using technology like Dimensional Chips." He noted.

"And between my own investigation and Mayl's... unique abilities." Miyabi said. "I've been able to scout out to all but the inner chamber. The Emerald Spears are carrying firearms on them, but mostly electricity guns to try and disrupt those with cross fusion. With all our abilities, I evaluated it to be merely a difficult battle between the four of us."

"But there are 11." Tesla noted. "I'd probably do best near the front when we charge in. Magnetman and I can take a lot of Damage and

knock opponents out of the way."

Lan grinned. "Actually... with all of you here, I have a plan."

Life was not always great for Elpizo. He had joined up with the Emerald Spears mainly out of a want to belong. He had never been good at operating Navis, with his Navi Elpizo. exe being mainly a cosmetic change, and only getting a handle of basic chip combos. But Xander said he could make a difference, and it was their duty to guard the door, which he would do! Unfortunately for both poor Elpizo's, the door then exploded inwards after being cut in three directions as unseen to them a shadow darted forward. Following that Elpizo had to duck out of the way to avoid the twin charging of two shapes, one red and one blue, before they fused back into one being while 9 other shape passed by... and it was only a minute later that he realized who they were.

"Elpizo to command! We have 11 Cross fused humans in the building. I repeat, 11!"

To simply say it was a massacre as the Cross Fusion team made their way through would be an understatement. While each Emerald spear was well defended personally and armed with rifles that were designed to shoot electricity to try and disrupt the Cross Fusion, not to mention each having a Normal Navi by their side and even a few viruses... none of them were truly prepared for what came at them. First, they'd feel a slight breeze, those few unlucky enough to keep themselves fully exposed either knocked out or deleted in an instant. This would be followed by heavy impact as a powerful red figure rushed at them. Those who fired the lightning guns would find them absorbed by the figure. Those firing other shots would see them bounce off of a powerful barrier or, in the case of explosives, a burst of air sending them hurtling back towards them. But the Cross fused member didn't even slow down as they passed... but anyone who tried to cut them down or shoot them would expose themselves to quite literal fire power and axe swings providing an offensive. If any

viruses were left at this stage most would find them either being blasted into deletion from seemingly nowhere, or turned against them. To any who were extremely dug in, they'd find themselves contending with pill shaped blasts and piercing spikes on their position. And if any navi was still around and not logged out or deleted by this point, they'd find themselves in range for an array of blasts and slashes.

But at the core two seemed to be unconcerned with the fighting... or more accurately, being preserved from it for the moment. It had gone unsaid but both Lan and Chaud, as well as the other members, could tell that this was going much too easily. There should be stronger weaponry, better dug in defenses, something that would make sense knowing that at least three Cross Fusion able people were around the area at almost all times. Even Maylu seemed to conserve her ammunition. After all, while most are better at long range, it would be a mid to short ranged battle if such a thing happened. As they headed, they didn't head for the more well known main computer room... but rather, what Searchman, Shadowman and Rush had managed to gather before Lan had arrived and they had been used in Cross Fusion.

As they burst in Lan allowed himself a moment of nostalgia. He remembered this lab in particular. It was the one where Yuichiro had been doing the tests with Prismman and Cross Fusion. As they entered they noticed the scientists of Sci Lab... each and every one of them tied up, bound and gagged at the edge of the room... with two exceptions. The first was Yuichiro Hikari himself, bound, but not gagged it seemed as he sat near the other figure in the room. His hair was spiked and seemed to cover one of his eyes. Like the other Emerald spears he wore green, but much more casually than they ere, seeming to just wear a green shirt and jeans. But even so Lan put himself on guard even as the guy... claps.

"Well done Lan Hikari.. I had heard tales of your ability to gather allies... I thought that at the least I'd have to contend with you and

the famous Net Savior Chaud... but it seems that you've brought enough here for me to put on a display." Xander admitted.

"Let my dad and the others go!" Lan called out.

Xander smiled. "Don't worry yourself. The hostage taking was merely a threat. A threat to gather you and the others here. I founded the Emerald Spears to get rid of the true scourge to humanity... one that enlightened me all too recently. Net Navis."

"Damn it Xander... why?" Yuichiro asked.

"Be quiet Yuichiro. I don't want to have to hurt you, but I have to chat to these fine people here who show such disregard for my ideas... and yet, at the same time, show exactly how navi's should be. Simple enhancements for us to use. Weapons if needed."

"Dr. Xander Payne... I thought there was something familiar with that name when you tried to hire me. You were one of the scientists at Sci Lab prior to the Duo incident." Miyabi noted. As the other members of the team looked at him he shrugged. "I do research on my targets when I'm hired, and more than one has tried to hire me to disrupt Sci Lab before falling short on payment."

"Then why are you so against them now?" Jasmine asked. "If you worked with Lan's dad, then surely you should be one of the strongest supporters?"

Xander's face took on a stony look. "When viruses started appearing into the real world months ago, I was part of the Sci Lab team to check it out, to ensure if the situation was one where we could handle it ourselves, a minor viral attack, or if we'd need to call upon the Cross Fusion team." He explained. "This was early into the team's life... Dimensional Chips were known about, but the team only consisted of three people at the time and we couldn't risk being stretched thin... so it was both my misfortune and my clouded judgement that failed me when I stumbled across it. Him or her.

Whatever you want to call that Digital Demon who was summoning viruses to the area. I'll never forget that white and green devil..."

"White and Green... Slur?" Dingo asked.

"But why was she there? She can usually do what she wants from the comet apparently, so why?" Ms. Yuri asked.

"Who can answer what a demon like her was doing there?" Xander noted. "I can tell you that she did enlighten me to the truth... very painfully" He muttered, slowly letting a hand travel up to his face before he forced it down. "From there I realized... that for all we've done, navi's have done us more harm than good. The internet as it is has evolved the wrong way. I formed the Emerald Spears to fight for this cause."

"Not much of a fight though!" Fyrefox pointed out. "It was dead easy."

"Too easy." Tesla noted. "You've got something prepared... your demonstration, no doubt."

Xander chuckled. "Oh yes... and what a display it is. Behold everyone... the demon who plagued us so much in the name of Duo!" He declared as he pulled out what looked to be a modified PET. He put on the viewscreen... and a collective gasp went around the room. There was Slur... but not as they knew her. She seemed to be tied to a table, her data seeming to fall apart on occasion, only for electricity to run through her bindings and force it all back together. Each time a growl of frustration and pain escaped her lips. "We managed to find her data scattered after the incident... and while we couldn't recover it all... we had enough to reconstruct her."

"D-damn you human... end my torment..." Slur croaked out. Her voice sounded rough. "You keep me alive, bound to you and so far from my master. enacting every little vengeance you can... haven't you had enough?"

Xander frowned. "No demon. Not until the way life should be lived is restored." He insisted. "And my plan is to use you to do that... to show the true potential for NAvi's. Not as friends or guardians... but as weapons."

"And you think we'll let you do that?" Mayl asked, multiple grunts of affirmation going around.

"Xander... why? Even so... that's going too far." Yuichiro pointed out.

Xander sighed as he reached into his pocket. "And this is why I left Yuichiro. You wouldn't understand this. You've got too much invested in this current world. And sadly, it seems your son and his friends must pay for our sins." He stated as he pulled out a chip... one all too familiar to a few of them. Shaped like a synchro chip but purple and yellow in colour. "Now..."

"Wait! That's not a Synchro Chip!" Lan cried out.

"It's a Dark Synchro Chip, it will corrupt you!" Ms. Yuri added... and even so, they felt a blur as Miyabi dashed forward... only for Xander to press an option on the PET. Wires appeared from the floor and lunged at Miyabi, threatening to entangle him as the ninja leaped back.

"Oh I know what it is... but I feel that like this... it'll do something different." Xander remarked with a smirk. "Let the demonstration begin! Dark Synchro Chip in, Download!" And then a blazing orb of light consumed them... and temporarily the room was nothing but light...

It all happened so fast. If it hadn't been for pure instinct guiding him Lan was sure that the blast that fired out of the glowing orb would have hit him... and even so, he only just rolled out of the way enough to avoid damage. He spared a look back and gasped... Mayl, Jasmine, Dingo and even the heavier Fyrefox laid sprawled on the ground by the sudden blast and knocked out of crossfusion. Despite

this Tesla stood in front of them with her arms open wide, a forcefield flickered and died in her hands. She slumped forwards as she fell out of cross fusion as well. Just under half their number knocked out in one attack. The only ones who still stood after that were those who had an instinct for this sort of thing and the speed to pull it off, it seemed. Still as the light cleared there stood Payne... or more accurately CF Slur, clad in the green and white of the herald of Duo, but with a crucial difference in that the few red crystals on the vaguely feminine androgynous navi had been tainted purple. And then Xander laughed.

"Amazing... I had simply theorized it, but it seems I was correct! The power of Duo given to Slur gives her more power, but also nullifies the negative effects of Dark Chips, and prevents her from taking control!" He declared. "Watch people of DenTech City! Watch as I show you the power of a navi harnessed entirely for use by humans, instead of companionship and-"

"Now!" Chaud shouted. As he did Yuichiro, still so close to the changed Xander, pushed himself as best as he could out of the way. "Program Advance: Life Sword!" As he said this he leaped forward with the super charged Program Advance in hands.

"Program Advance: Mad Fang!" Ms. Yuri declared as she swung forth both hands with fired out a flurry of super powered fangs towards the cross fused Xander.

"Program Advance: Giga Cannon!" Raika shouted as he aimed the powerful blast to fire in the gap between the fangs.

"Program Advance: Evil Cut!" Miyabi added as he blurred forward, him and Chaud slicing at the cross fused Slur in unison.

"Program Advance: Infinite Vulcan!" Lan and Charlie called out in unison, Charlie's rotors a blur as he does as they rapidly blast away at the cross fused navi... and smoke is knocked up by the sheer amount of shots fired. Then suddenly a pair of gasps sounded out as Chaud fell to the floor and clutched one side even as he fell out of

Cross Fuse. Miyabi was still fused but leaped back towards the scientists. The dust cleared in an instant and showed that Xander had transformed one of his arms into a glowing blade.

"Heh... I'll admit, that actually hurt a bit... but that was your best shot." Xander stated with a slight cackle. "My turn!" Suddenly cables burst through the floor and wrapped around the legs of all those who stood. Charlie and Miyabi swiftly took to the walls even as Ms Yuri was taken down with a single cut from the energy blade. Xander grinned madly, clear to all the world.

Or at least, clear to Yuichiro. "Xander, stop! The Dark Synchro chip is making you go out of control!" Yuichiro shouted.

"You always thought you knew better Yuichiro... but the fact is, I'm doing this all to show the potential. Show how much better Navi's are simply used as tools!" Xander declared as he charged towards Lan...

Only for a loud clang to reverberate through the room as energy blade met metal fist. CF Megaman MetalSoul looked up at CF Slur. "Tools? You're not even using Slur as a tool. You're using her as a weapon! Navi's gain strength through partnerships with others. Even Slur gained her power from Duo!" Lan declared. The metal fist he guarded with broke... but swiftly reformed into a sword as ProtoSoul activated. While Lan wasn't a paranoid boy he had clearly thought something was off when he entered the room. Even so Xander just grinned as a blast hits him... and glanced off.

"Useless." Raika's eyes widened as he heard Xander's voice behind him. The one in front of Lan disappeared as if an illusion and Raika crumpled down into a heap as his cross fusion ended, a dark bruise already appearing on his head. "A blow to the head... nothing too lethal, wouldn't do to kill my test subjects." Xander remarked... even as powerful winds whipped themselves up and picked him up. "Oh?"

"Muramasa!"

"NeoVariable Sword!"

Charlie and Miyabi, two of the fastest cross fusioned members, struck at Xander at once... and found both blades grabbed in Xanders hands. "I already told you it's useless!" He declared. As he did the tornado dispersed and he slammed the two into each other. "And this is the might of the Cross Fusion team? Pathetic."

" *They're* pathetic?" Lan asked... but at the same time it seem to come out as two voices. One Lan Hikari, one Hub Hikari.

"You sacrificed your own men to simply distract us, to provide entertainment or even wear us down because you thought that having a super powered navi enhanced by a Dark Chip wasn't enough. And while you let them suffer you're making Slur suffer more!" Hub declared

"You've denied her every right she could possibly have. The right to redeem herself. The right to peace. Denying her from basic freedom or even at the very least a death like she begged!" Lan added. "For all the death and destruction that Slur might've brought, she did because Duo was judging us!"

"All you can say is that you're doing this for revenge." Hub pointed out.

"For being in the wrong place at the wrong time." Lan coldly said.

"Shut up! You're a kid and a pile of Data! What could you know about suffering that pain?" Xander declared as he rushed at Lan. Cables burst from the floor and wrapped around the Cross Fused Megaman, completely binding him. "Well while you might not know, your father soon will!" Xander cackled as a blade outstretched from his arm.

And yet Lan... no, at that point it wasn't just Lan Hikari but both sides, glared at him. "Even so... the others will keep fighting." The two declared "Because it is our duty!"

Inches before the blade of light would have decapitated Lan another glow came from the head crystal of CF Slur... which briefly turned

red as a yellow orb flew out of it. A burst of light and energy filled the room which sent even Xander flying back... and when the light faded he couldn't speak. How could he? What stood before him shouldn't be possible! For what stood before him was clad in a black bodysuit with green lines drawing down into deep green-blue boots that seemed to have him float effortlessly over the floor. His chest was clad in white armor with a column pattern while Megaman's navi symbol was on his chest. On the black shoulders were two green cross shaped crystals but the black stopped there as the rest of the arms were covered in two large white sleeves, almost looking like petals although not as big as slurs own and still ending in hands. Finally the helmet looked almost exactly the same to Slur's, but with a navi symbol on each fin. Lan seemed just as stunned as Xander as he finally put words to what he saw.

"Soul Unison... Slur Soul!" Of course he knew the term this loop was Double Soul... but this wasn't just two souls working together. These were two souls perfectly in sync with one another, if only briefly. A unison of souls. Of course Xander growled and disappeared... but to the eyes of CF Megaman Slur Soul, he seemed almost slow as energy gathered in his palm... only for cabling to spring out over CF Slur and wrap around him. Lan charged forward and seemed to all the world like a blur as he slammed his palm into Xander. The palm glowed even as he did and sent the Dark Cross Fused madman flying into a wall hard enough to leave an imprint. Before Xander could steady himself he found a blast of energy fired at him, exploding on impact. as he stumbled out of it Lan rushed forward as his hand turned into an energy sword.

"N-no... this power... this power was supposed to be my ultimate weapon to rid the world of navis!" Xander declared... and as he did a dark aura appeared around him. The burst of it was enough to knock Lan back and off balance. "Die!" Xander bellowed as he thrust a glow blade forward... and through Lan.

"No!" Yuichiro cried out... only for him and Xander to blink as the apparently stabbed Lan disappeared and reappeared just above

Xander.

"Too slow. Justice One!" The voice... it wasn't Lan. It wasn't Hub. It wasn't even Slur. It was all three in unison as their fist glowed, expanding to giant size, and slammed down into the head crystal... which shattered. As it shattered the data burst off of Xander as his cross fusion was forcefully ended... and his PET fell to the ground, crushed by the impact. Lan panted in exhaustion... but was surprised when Slur rose from the PET. However, Slur simply smiled.

"Thank you... Hikaris." Slur said before her data disintegrated. As she did the damaged PET spat out the Dark Synchro chip. Xander slowly reached out to it before a loud crunch echoed out as Lan landed on it.

"Do you see what you've done Xander?" Lan asked. "Who you've hurt, both directly and indirectly? How many lives you put at risk? What justifies all this?"

"P-Power... to save... everyone..." Xander weakly argued... before he slumped forward, knocked out.

"So dad... was Xander always that way?" Lan asked. It was getting into the evening and both her and Yuichiro were slowly walking home. Treasure the life you have and all that, and it would be a nice surprise for his mum when they showed up.

Yuichiro sighed. "He had always been... zealous. But before the incident... he always channeled it in such a good way. And as much as I hate to say it, he was right in that a Dark Synchro Chip seemed to be mostly cancelled out by Slur's connection to Duo. He was... and still is a brilliant man."

"And yet it ended up being used so badly..." Megaman noted.

"It's funny isn't it?" Lan admitted. "Evil men like Wily can find redemption... and yet good guys like Xander can fall so far."

"And yet you can still make a good thing out of a bad situation." Yuichiro noted. "Ah, there's the house. I wonder what your mother has in store for us?"

As his father walked forward, Lan hung back a little as he pulled out a new pair of chips. One a mighty fist, the Justice One... and the other showed a red diamond with the mark of Duo on it. "I suppose even bad things like this can have some good in the end." Lan said.

"Let's just hope that wherever Slur is now, she's resting peacefully." Megaman admitted.

12.11 (Cameos from OathToOblivion, Leonite, and Thanatos's Scribe)

Eleven Battle Chasers

"It's a beautiful day here at the Battle and Chase circuit!"

"Indeed it is, Plum, and we've got quite the field today for our racing fans!"

"Very true, Ripot! Of course there's the Mega Twins, Mega Man and Mega Woman racing respectively in the Rush Roadstar and the Tango Turbo."

"But as we all know, where there's Light there's Wily! Bass is out on the field today in the Treble Darkstar, along with Shadow Man in the Shinobi Master and Turbo Man racing... well, as himself actually."

"Ah, but it's not just a grudge match between Light and Wily today either! From Dr. Cossack comes Skull Man in the Skull Dugger! And here for the chance to personally race against Turbo Man is the transforming stunt robot Nitro Man! Also racing as himself."

"But let's not forget the new faces either! Having literally popped out of a pipe a few days ago, the man known only as Mario is joining the racers in the B-Dasher! Then there's the rivalry between the other two out there, Yusei Fudo on the Yusei Go and Jack Atlas on his high tech super-wheel, the Wheel of Fortune!"

"Yes, though those last two seem to think they're here for a high speed card duel for reasons that have yet to be adequately explained to me. Ah, well, they'll figure out the reality of the track soon enough!"

"Indeed! And with that, we're almost ready to... Hold on a moment, I've just been informed that there's a last-minute addition to the field. Now racing in the eleventh position is Auto from Light Labs, driving the..."

"The what?"

"The... Auto Mobile? Is he serious?"

12.10 (Idea from Leonite and zeusdemigod131)

Ten Forms of Sigma

"We wish you a Merry Christmas!

We wish you a Merry Christmas!"

X blinked as he answered the front door of Maverick Hunter HQ and ran a diagnostic on his sensory inputs.

"We wish you a Merry Christmas,

And a Happy New Year!"

"Zero?!" he yelled back into the building frantically.

"Good tidings we bring,

To you and your kin!

We wish you a Merry Christmas,

And a Happy New Year!"

The pounding of feet heralded the arrival of the crimson hunter, who also stared at what X was seeing.

"Now bring us some figgy pudding!

Now bring us some figgy pudding!"

"Are you seeing this?"

"Maybe?" Zero hesitated. "I mean... This can't really be happening..."

"Now bring us some figgy pudding,

And a cup of good cheer!"

"But none of our sensory inputs are malfunctioning..." X finished as he continued staring. "Yeah..."

"We won't go until we get some!

We won't go until we get some!"

Outside of Maverick Hunter HQ, holding small songsheets and singing their hearts out were Sigma in his original form he'd had from his creation until he'd originally turned Maverick, complete with cape...

"We won't go until we get some,

So bring it right here!"

Along with Sigma, in his first resurrection body that still showed the claw sheaths on his wrists; and Sigma in a form like the first, but sans cape...

"So bring us some figgy pudding!

So bring us some figgy pudding!"

Then there was the purple beetle-like form of Sigma, right next to the blue-armored Sigma, plus the purple and yellow armored Sigma in his ratty reaper-like cloak...

"So bring us some figgy pudding,

And bring it right here!"

Sigma was also there, in his white armor with a sectioned purple cape that almost looked like wings if you looked at it right, with his buddy Sigma who had clearly seen better days with his rather beat-up zombie-like body...

"Good tidings we bring,

To you and your kin!"

Standing near the back was Sigma, with his purple armor, green shoulders with white cylinders jutting out, and high white armored collar...

"We wish you a Merry Christmas,

And a Happy New Year!"

And finally, Sigma in his green, purple, red, and brown armor with the *really* high red collar.

"Okay, next song boys!" Sigma grinned pleasantly.

"I want a hippopotamus for Christmas!"

X and Zero, along with an ever-growing number of Hunters, couldn't think of anything to do but stare incredulously as they were serenaded by the caroling Sigmas.

"Only a hippopotamus will do!"

12.9 (From Thanatos's Scribe)

Nine Models of Joe

Joe felt the world 'shift' as he recognized the transition between one Loop and the next, and felt his optic flicker until stopping with him being in what appeared to be Light Labs. Still, something seemed... different than usual. Running a quick diagnostic through his system, Joe discovered that his systems were vastly different from his baseline chassis: His processors were much more advanced, he surprisingly actually had an I.C. chip, which was usually reserved solely for Robot Masters, and he actually had the charge upgrade that only Rock and Blues got from the doctor.

"Sniper Joe, there you are!" A familiar voice cried out with a touch of what seemed to be desperation, and Joe turned around to see Dr. Albert Wily, albeit looking healthier than most Loops, running towards him. Instinctively, the green robot pointed his gun – no, Buster Arm, he reminded himself – and began charging the weapon as he prepared to fire the charged shot. The feeling of the attack itself could only be best described as ecstatic, it's energy flowing through Joe's body.

"Dr. Wily, you are under arrest for various crimes, which include attempted rebellion and betrayal. Surrender immediately." Joe stated as he refocused attention on the balding doctor. Rather than run or plead for mercy, however, Wily stopped moving and began... crying?

Joe paused as he looked down at the doctor, who was now weeping and mentioning how "They have all betrayed mankind". Checking his

memory logs for new 'Loop memories', he made a startling discovery about this Loop: Apparently, instead of Dr. Light and Dr. Wily working to create DLN-000: Blues, they had each worked on a separate robot, with Dr. Light making the clumsy assistant robot designated 'Auto' to help with maintenance work and mechanical construction while Dr. Wily built Joe himself for law enforcement and military combat. When the two robots were brought to the government officials for whose idea would be used, the officials were torn between who would be accepted. That is, of course, until Auto 'upgraded' the officials' vehicle to have turbo thrusters without informing them of the changes. Needless to say, the officials weren't pleased with this, and Dr. Wily was the one given the green light to continue with his projects on peacekeeping through autonomous forces. Despite of the fact that Dr. Light wasn't the one given this permission, Wily let the doctor join him at his side, and the technological industry boomed thanks to WilyTech. As time passed on and more Robot Masters, or Joe Masters as they were called, were made, Sniper Joe himself slowly got more and more upgrades, with better processors being the forefront of these upgrade and eventually resulting in him getting the charge upgrade to his Buster Arm. A few days before Joe had Awakened, Dr. Light, who had developed a severe case of jealousy similar to Wily in baseline, had reprogrammed the other eight Joe Masters to be his generals.

Realizing that he was targeting the wrong doctor, Joe lowered his Buster Arm and let the charged shot dissipate. At this, Dr. Wily stopped his sobbing and looked at Joe with some apprehension.

"Sniper Joe, you're not... reprogrammed?" He said with a tinge of what Joe had come to realize as 'hope' in his voice.

"Affirmative, Dr. Wily. It appears as though that the reprogramming has not affected me due to the majority of my original programming being inaccessible to the former ally Dr. Light." Joe theorized, and Dr. Wily's shoulders sagged in relief.

"Thank goodness for that." Dr. Wily said as he walked briskly over to the computers and accessed the satellite systems, his fingers

blurring across the keyboard. After a few minutes, his hands stopped moving and he pressed a button off to the side, causing for the monitor to display a circle moving into Joe. "From what I've seen, the eight Joe Masters frequent these areas. If you take them out, then you'll be able to go after Thomas himself," Wily stated, and Joe near-instantly received the files.

"Understood, Dr. Wily," Joe said, and began walking over to the teleport station, the locations of the other eight Joe Masters flashing across his display. After viewing the various Joe Masters several times, he decided to follow DLN-001's advice on 'take the weakest boss first' and selected the area of the 'weakest' Joe as his target. Stepping onto the teleporter, Joe quickly submitted the co-ordinates to the teleporter, and the program began charging up for use. After a few seconds, the teleporter activated, and in a flash of light he was transported to near proximity of the first Joe Master.

12.8 (Idea from Gamerex27)

Eight Robot Masters

It was that time of year. The time of year that Rock tended to find himself pressed into public appearances as Mega Man by one Mayor Leonardo Dorado. And this Loop Roll wasn't Awake to help take any of the pressure off or divert the man's overly exuberant hijinks.

A man who was, at the moment, giving a speech regarding the upcoming winter holidays in front of an artificial pine tree that could dwarf some office buildings, decked from trunk to tip in bright lights, garlands, and oversized ornaments.

And something overhead that sounded like a low-flying jet...

"–join me, Mega City in a supreme celebration as we count down the days unti–"

"Down!" Rock yelled as he tackled the mayor off the podium right before the stage was smashed to pieces by a large machine landing on it very forcefully.

"What in the world is..." the mayor trailed off as he took in the giant multi-story object that had nearly flattened him. "No, no, no! The giant menorah was supposed to come up from underground during my speech! Someone get me the event engineers! I want to have a word with them!"

"Bwahahahahahaha!" an all-too familiar voice came from the mechanical menorah as the center candle (or at least something designed to look like one, because a real wax candle that size would have been a disaster waiting to happen) not only lit, but projected a massive hologram of an equally familiar face into the sky above.

Rock noted that in the middle of the Star of David stamped at the point of the giant menorah where the other candle holders branched off to the sides was a stylized 'W'.

"Yes, citizens of Mega City!" the projected face of Dr. Wily grinned widely, his balding head covered by a traditional Jewish yarmulke that Rock didn't recall ever seeing him wear before. "Join me as we use the days of my beloved Chanukah this year to count down to the first-ever celebration of Wily-Mas! If you're all good boys and girls and swear obedience to me, I might even bring you a present! But, I'm getting ahead of myself! Before that happens, we must light the menorah! And who better to light it than my special Chanukah Masters, after destroying Mega Man!"

A door in the right-most candle holder slid open and out came a... rather human-looking robot. One wearing what appeared to be fairly orthodox Jewish prayer attire. Were it not for the flame burning atop his yarmulke, he'd actually appear almost ordinary.

That and the fact that he'd jumped down from several dozen feet in the air like it was nothing.

"Just one of you?" Rock found himself asking.

"One each day," the robot confirmed. "The rituals must be observed after all."

"Just making sure," Rock nodded. If they wanted to come one at a time, he wasn't about to try and convince them otherwise. "Who are you, exactly?"

"I am Olive Chanukah," the robot introduced, inclining his head in a respectful manner and touching his fingers to the open flame atop his yarmulke. Fingers that came away on fire, suggesting that it was more than a gesture of respect in this case. "Named after the miracle oil that burned for eight nights when there was enough for but one. And now that same miracle oil shall burn you."

The robot pointed his burning fingers at Rock, and let loose with a spray of oil from the back of his hand that ignited into a blazing flamethrower, forcing Rock to jump back as people around began to run screaming.

"You need to stop this!" he yelled back. "People are going to get hurt!"

"We do this in the name of Wily," the robot declared firmly as he let loose another stream of burning oil. "Like in the origins of Chanukah, we are the pure facing the unpure, and you shall burn for your insolence."

Rock dove to the side as more and more flames were unleashed and tried to take stock of the situation. His opponent didn't seem concerned with collateral damage, but he also wasn't being very mobile. Also, the only reason he was shooting fire was because of the pilot light taken from the flame atop his head, not because of his master weapon...

Diving to the side of another blast of flames, Rock made his decision and darted forward before another shot could be taken and grabbed

Olive Chanukah's arm to copy his power. Watching his opponent's eyes widen, he knew he'd chosen the right course of action as he switched to the 'Miracle Oil' weapon and fired a stream of flammable liquid at the arm with the pilot light burning on his fingers.

Instantly, the arm and about half the robot's body went up in flame.

"No! The candle! The menorah!" Olive Chanukah flailed, trying to defend the flame atop the yarmulke on his head from the ones burning the rest of him. "If my flame goes out, the ritual will be broken!"

Rock grabbed the robot's non-burning arm and looked him in the eye. "Let me... I'll light it for you."

"You..." the look of gratitude as Rock reached up with oiled fingers to touch the tiny flame and set them alight was surprisingly sincere, "you will? Thank you..."

As the Chanukah Master collapsed from the flames burning his form, Rock whistled for Rush to turn into his jet mode and carry him up to the first 'candle', directly above where Olive Chanukah had emerged from.

Rock had shown up in civilian garb, hoping that things might go a little easier the second day. Unfortunately, certain things were conspiring to make that problematic.

The first was that the second chamber on Wily's menorah was already open when he got there. The second was that someone was selling candle-topped yarmulkes to apparently eager civilians. Many of which people had lit with actual flames.

"Oh, boy... this could be trouble..." he moaned to himself, pondering if he should try and seek out the Chanukah Master in his civilian guise, or just go ahead and armor up and see who stepped forth.

"Problems?" a female voice cut into his thoughts. Jumping slightly, he whipped around to see a girl perhaps a bit taller than him dressed in form-fitting black sport thermals and one of those flame-topped yarmulkes. "Sorry about that," the girl apologized for startling him and offered her hand in greeting. "I'm Judith."

"Rock," he grasped her hand in a friendly manner, grinning sheepishly. "And I was just looking around. There was some trouble here yesterday after all..."

"Well, maybe I can stick with you and help keep an eye out!" Judith smiled. "Can't be too careful!"

"That'd be cool," Rock smiled. "Honestly, in that getup you look like some sort of Judaic ninja or something."

"Do I really?" Judith laughed. "Well, then let's see what my ninja senses can pick up!"

They actually had a lot of fun together as sunset approached slowly, but surely. They looked around the various stalls and performers who had set up in the square, but neither spotted anything suspicious. It wasn't long until they were standing together looking at Wily's giant menorah, Judith putting a comforting hand on Rock's shoulder.

"It's alright... Maybe nothing will happen this time..." Judith assured him as she rubbed his shoulder comfortingly.

"Yeah, maybe..." Rock trailed off as he stared at the second open spot on the menorah, waiting. When he felt the hand on his shoulder tighten firmly, he whipped his hand up just in time to catch the blade of a knife before it plunged into his neck.

"How...?" Judith whispered in surprise.

"When we shook hands earlier, I could tell you were a robot," Rock stated calmly. "And your name... Judith. The same as the woman who assassinated Holophernes in Hebrew legend and carried his

severed head back to those who were losing faith in order to bolster their morale."

"You know your history... but it won't help you..." Judith's voice hardened as she tried to wrest the knife back, but Rock held on tight even as he twisted around to face her and gain better leverage.

The two struggled back and forth, their struggle for control of the Assassin's Knife blurring into one long event until before Rock really knew what had happened, Judith's eyes shot open wide in shock. Looking down, he saw that the struggle had somehow resulted in his plunging the blade into her chest, as the sparking of severed wires could attest to.

"The... menorah..." she gasped out as systems began failing from the severed circuitry.

"I'll light it," Rock promised as he oiled his fingers up and touched them to the flame atop her head.

Rock had decided to show up the third day in his armor instead and try to just cut to the chase. He nearly had his head taken off by a potato of all things.

"Yes! Dance impure one!" the apparent young man in a chef's outfit, save for the flame-topped yarmulke instead of the more stereotypical hat yelled as he jumped out from behind his latke stand, several of his customers backing away in fearful confusion. About the only thing differentiating him from a normal human was the arm cannon he'd tried to shoot Rock with. "Dance for Latke Chanukah and his Potato Cannon! Dance in memory of Olive and Judith Chanukah!"

"Sure thing!" Rock yelled as he grabbed one of the spuds out of the air and went into a spinning whip motion. "I call this dance 'Return to Sender'!"

"Ack, no...!" Latke Chanukah yelled as the spud was flung straight down the barrel of his arm cannon, which misfired spectacularly.

Rock didn't even need to hear the downed robot's plea to start oiling his fingers up in preparation of transferring the flame from atop his head to the menorah candle he'd emerged from beneath.

Rock sighed. Again, the chamber beneath that day's candle had been open before he'd arrived. Which again left him to search through the crowd for Wily's next Chanukah master. A task made all the harder with all the people wearing flame-topped yarmulkes in the square. And not just adults, but apparently children too. Sometimes he wondered just what people thought that made something like that seem a good idea...

"Wanna play?" a childish voice asked him suddenly, causing him to turn and look at a young boy, shorter than Rock himself, wearing a bright t-shirt, overalls, a flame-topped yarmulke, and idly spinning a large dreidel in his hand.

"Sure, why not?" Rock shrugged, sure that he'd be one of the first to know when Wily's robot made a move.

"Okay, me first!" the boy grinned and sent his dreidel spinning, only for a ball from somewhere else to knock into it. "Hey!"

"Sorry!" another kid apologized as he ran up to grab the ball before running back off.

"Tch..." the first boy looked disappointed as he spotted the side the dreidel had landed on. "Nun... Oh, well... your spin..."

"Okay," Rock accepted the item pleasantly and gave it a spin. "What are we playing for anyway?"

"You'll see..." the boy smiled mysteriously as the dreidel stopped on a different character this time.

"Huh... Shin..." Rock identified the character, only to feel a distinct pulling sensation on his power core as roughly an eighth of his energy was yanked out into a glowing ball that sped over to the boy and was absorbed. "You...? You're...?"

"Dreidel Chanukah," the boy confirmed with a nasty smile as he picked up his namesake. "And it's my turn."

The boy robot gave the dreidel another spin and what it landed on made Rock's processors go cold.

"Heh... Hei..." Dreidel Chanukah smirked as more of Rock's power core was yanked out. No less than half of what he had remaining. Smiling confidently, the child-like robot handed him the dreidel. "Your turn with the Dreidel Roulette... Try not to die too fast..."

Rock accepted the device and held it in his hands, testing the weight and balance before throwing. The dreidel spun ominously before slowing and finally landing on a character that made Rock's opponent gain a look of terror. "Gimel."

"No..." Dreidel Chanukah reached his hand up to the flame atop his head desperately as if to protect it. "Don't let..."

Rock caught the smaller robot as he collapsed from a depleted power core and raised oil-tipped fingers to the flame his foe had tried to guard.

"I won't..." he promised.

Rock sighed as he resorted to shopping at the stalls around the area. Each of the Chanukah Masters so far had been surprisingly human-like, their main defining feature being the flame-topped yarmulke each of them wore on their heads, making them look a bit like humanoid candles.

The fact that identical novelty headwear was being worn by practically every other civilian in the area by this point was making it hard to identify them.

"An excellent choice," the sharp-dressed vendor said as he bagged the trinket Rock had bought for the local Unawake version of his sister. "Here," the man continued as he gripped Rock's arm tightly and leveled one of the most strangely shaped machine guns ever at Rock's chest. "Let Gelt Chanukah get your change..."

Rock barely wrenched himself out of the way before a barrage of coins tore through the space he'd just occupied and into the concrete behind where he'd been standing.

"Actually," Rock shot back as he summoned his armor and called up the Change Maker weapon he'd just copied, "why don't you keep the change!"

Gelt Chanukah jerked spastically as the coin projectiles tore through him and Rock prepared himself to light the next candle.

"Okay... how am I going to get nearly blindsided today?" Rock sighed to himself.

"Mega Man!" a strong voice caused the crowd to part from around a man in a choir outfit and a flame-topped yarmulke. "I, Music Chanukah do hereby call you to present yourself!"

"Sure thing," Rock stepped forward as he summoned his armor.

Music Chanukah actually seemed surprised that it had been that simple.

"So... now what?" Rock asked, prepared for about anything.

Well, anything but his opponent beginning to sing.

"Ma'oz Tzur Yeshu'ati, lekha na'eh leshabe'ah.

Tikon beit tefilati, vesham toda nezabe'ah.

Le'et takhin matbe'ah mitzar hamnabe'ah.

Az egmor beshir mizmor hanukat hamizbe'ah."

Rock blinked as the lyrics washed over the area, and his vision began to swim and his balance become harder to maintain.

"Ra'ot save'ah nafshi, beyagon kohi kala.

Hayyai mareru vekoshi, beshi'abud malkhut egla.

Uvyado hagdola hotzi et hasgula.

Heil par'o vekhol zar'o yaredu ke'even bimtzula."

He recognized the lyrics from research he'd been doing into the holiday after Wily's initial announcement. He knew what was next and as Music Chanukah began the next verse, Rock joined him, hoping that he could counteract the disabling effects.

"Dvir kodsho hevi'ani, vegam sham lo shakateti.

Uva noges vehiglani, ki zarim avadti.

Vyein ra'al masakhti, kim'at she'avarti.

Ketz Bavel Zerubavel, leketz shiv'im nosha'ati."

Surprisingly, it actually worked. Rock felt his systems begin to stabilize as he joined in singing the Ma'oz Tzur and matched his vocalizations to the peculiar tones of his opponent.

"Kerot komat berosh bikesh, Agagi ben Hamdatah.

veniheyata lo lefah ulemokesh, vega'avato nishbata.

Rosh yemini niseta, ve'oyev shmo mahita.

Rov banav vekinyanav al ha'etz talita."

In fact, Music Chanukah was appearing to sway a bit erratically as Rock continued on.

"Yevanim nikbetzu alai, azai bimei Hashmanim.

Ufartzu homot migdalai, vetim'u kol hashemanim.

Uminotar kankanim na'asa nes lashoshanim.

Bnei vina yemei shmona kav'u shir urenanim."

He was swaying very erratically now, and Rock moved up to catch him so his flame wasn't extinguished before he could perform the candle lighting as he finished the song.

"Hasof zroa kodshekha, vekarev ketz hayeshu'a.

Nkom nikmat dam avadeikha me'uma haresha'a.

Ki arkha hasha'a, ve'ein ketz limei hara'a.

Dkheh admon betzel tzalmon, hakem lanu ro'im shiv'a."

"Mega Man! Step forth and face me!" yelled the tall muscular armored man with the flame-topped yarmulke. The armor, while clearly pristine and made from modern materials, was styled after a more ancient form typical of the era the Greeks or the Romans. "Come and face the great warrior, Maccabee Chanukah! Step forth unless you are too cowardly to do so!"

"Er..." Rock sweatdropped as he stared up at the latest Chanukah Master from across the rapidly clearing area, "I'm right *here* ..."

"So you are!" Maccabee Chanukah pointed dramatically as he began to swing a doubled-up piece of cable in his other hand. "It seems you do possess a warrior's courage! But not the cunning to achieve a warrior's victory! Not when I possess the great weapon of legend!"

"The great weapon of legend?" Rock arched an eyebrow. "That's a–"

"Ice Sling!" Maccabee Chanukah yelled as he whipped the cable forward, sending a shard of ice rocketing towards the diving Mega Man at insane speeds, tearing through the blue bomber's armored leg before he managed to get behind one of the blocky works of modern art that dotted the area.

"Argh..." Rock grit his teeth as he assessed the damage to his leg.

"Hahaha! It seems your courage has fled, impure one!"

"He sounds like the bullies at my school..." a young voice said next to Rock, prompting him to look over at a young boy who had also taken cover behind the large sculpture.

"Heh..." Rock forced a grin. "You'd be surprised how similar bullies sound, no matter where they're from... What's your name?"

"David..." the boy answered, and Rock noted that he was also wearing a yarmulke, though not one with a flame atop it. This one seemed older. Well-worn and cared for. "My mom says it's after a great hero who stood up to a really big bully..." the boy pulled out a loop of nylon rope with a cloth pouch in the center. An old-style sling made of more modern material. "She says he used one of these to do it... I dunno, but it makes me feel better to hold it. Do you wanna hold it for a bit?"

"Actually..." Rock started considering the simple weapon carefully and looked around, spotting a pretty good-sized marble someone had apparently dropped. He pinked it up and turned back to the boy. "Do you think I could borrow it against this guy?"

"Sure!" the boy agreed cheerfully, handing the nylon sling over without question.

"Okay... I may only get one shot, so wish me luck," Rock said as he loaded the marble into the sling and began spinning it with one hand while he removed his helmet with the other.

He held the helmet out from behind cover and when a projectile impacted it with enough force to both penetrate all the way through and knock it out of his hand, he started moving. Ignoring the damage reports from his leg systems, he dashed out from behind cover, the borrowed sling whirling at inhuman speeds.

Maccabee Chanukah's eyes widened as he moved to quickly reload his own weapon at the same time as Rock took aim and fired, hitting the Chanukah Master right between the eyes. As Maccabee Chanukah fell, he dashed forwards to catch him and preserve the flame so it could be used to light the next 'candle' on Wily's menorah.

The young boy David watched as the robot hero flew up to light the next candle before flying back down to give the borrowed sling back.

"Whoa..."

It was the last day, and Rock was on edge. Knowing Dr. Wily, he'd have probably saved the nastiest piece of work for last, and this time the chamber hadn't yet opened.

Which likely meant that whatever was in it was something Wily considered strong enough not to need preparation time.

Speaking of which, the final menorah chamber opened and out stepped...

Well, it was a robot rabbi. Looking very human but with the same flame-topped yarmulke.

"Who are you?" Rock found himself asking.

"Zot Chanukah," the last of Wily's latest batch of robot masters replied rather pleasantly. "It is good to meet you on this day, Mega Man. Gmar chatimah tovah."

At the last phrase, Rock felt all of his systems seize up from some kind of electromagnetic interference. Centered directly on himself.

"W-wh...a...t?" he barely managed to force out as he identified a rather unmistakable energy signature, all the more noticeable due to how infrequently Dr. Wily made use of it.

Magic.

Zot Chanukah smiled benignly as he stepped up and reached outto touch Rock's forhead even as Rock himself struggled to bring his own arm up to try and push back against Zot's torso.

"It is as I said..." Zot Chanukah smiled as he prepared to unleash his magical anti-electronic field again, this time from point blank range.

"Gmar chatimah tovah," Rock managed it first though, since he didn't waste time posturing.

Dr. Wily grinned as he watched Mega Man catch the last of his Chanukah Masters to preserve the flame for the lighting ritual, his hand hovering anticipatorily over a large button. The moment the last candle was lit, the power circuit of his ultimate creation would be complete, and Mega Man would be helpless to stop him!

Yes! Mega Man would rue this day forev...

Was the blue brat... singing?

"Light one candle for the Maccabee children,

With thanks their light didn't die."

He... He *was* ... And it looked like the people who'd stayed to watch were joining in with the backup vocals...

"Light one candle for the pain they endured,

When their right to exist was denied."

Rock mounted Rush's jet mode, his fingers alight as he flew up to light Wily's menorah.

"Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice,

Justice and freedom demand!"

Down below, more and more voices were not just singing the backup vocals, but also joingin in the lyrics as more poured back into the square.

"And light one candle for the wisdom to know,

When the peacemaker's time is at hand!"

And was Rock touched his fingers to the candletip, the crowd burst out with the chorus.

"Don't let the light go out!

It's lasted for so many years!

Don't let the light go out!

Let it shine through our love and our tears!"

Dr. Wily's hand wavered as he listened to the music...

"Light one candle for the strength that we need,

To never become our own foe."

Above the scene, high atop one of the tallest towers, Blues looked down upon the events and listened.

"Light one candle for those who are suffering

A pain they learned so long ago."

The voices of the crowd began to grow in strength.

"Light one candle for all we believe in,

That anger not tear us apart!"

One figure, recognized as Mayor Leonardo Dorado jumped out in front of the crowd with a microphone to increase the volume of the gathering as more and more people joined in as Mega Man came down to land next to him.

"And light one candle to bind us together

With peace as the song in our heart!"

"...Bah!" Dr. Wily slammed his fist down on a completely different button, glaring angrily at the weapons shutdown notice he'd triggered.

"Getting soft, pops?" a voice cut in as the chorus was renewed, even louder than before.

"Hmph!" Wily huffed. "Never, Bass... Just lost interest is all..."

"Sure, whatever..."

"By the way," Dr. Wily said as he took something out of his pocket and flipped it towards his creation, "here."

"What is the memory that's valued so highly,

That we keep it alive in that flame?"

The crowd began to part as a few figures made their way through it. Auto, Roll, and Dr. Light.

"What's the commitment to those who have died?

We cry out 'they've not died in vain'!"

The three raced for the figure of Mega Man Roll leading the charge as she leapt at her brother in a relieved hug. Auto came up shortly after and swept them both up in an enthusiastic bear hug.

"We have come this far, always believing,

That justice will somehow prevail!"

Dr. Light joined his robot children at a more sedate pace as the song began to draw to a close.

"This is the burden, This is the promise,

This is why we will not fail!"

Bass flipped the coin his pops had tossed to him idly. It was an old thing. Old and sturdy. Supposedly it had been passed from parent to child since the original Chanukah or some such nonsense.

He'd actually believe it. The thing was certainly old enough.

'I think I'll keep this,' he thought to himself. *'It's not particularly useful, but proof that the old man has a heart underneath all his issues is pretty hard to come by...'*

He caught it one more time and with a twist of his hand it was gone.

"Don't let the light go out!

Don't let the light go out!

Don't let the light go out!"

12.7 (from DrTempo)

Seven Maverick Hunters

X, Zero, Axl, Alia, Layer, Palette, and Signas were enjoying a nice Christmas together. Sigma was more or less a non-issue these days. Mentally, X was glad he had Alia and Palette trained to fight this Loop. Most of HQ was empty for the holidays, barring a sudden emergency, leaving the seven of them to a nice small office party. Zero and Signas were drunk on eggnog, and were being...well, drunk.

X smiled at the shenanigans as the rest egged the two inebriated reploids on. *'A peaceful day.'*

12.6 (Inspiration from fractalman and a number of others)

Six Soccer Squirrels

Rock and Roll had to admit that Dr. Wily had... gone a little squirrely this Loop.

"And Ground Squirrel pops out of the ground, heading the ball into the air, setting up Flying Squirrel for a direct shot at Team Light's goal. There it is! Flying Squirrel's Tornado Shot and... SAVE BY GUTS MAN!"

"Hah!" the brawny robot master scoffed as he made to throw the ball back into play. "It'll take more than that to get by me!"

"And Guts Man throws the ball deep back into Team Wily's territory straight for the open Bomb Man!"

"I got it! Hah! Time for a long bomb–HEY! Get off me you pint-sized–!"

"Oh, but Pigmy Squirrel uses Bomb Man himself as a platform to intercept the ball and begins driving it back down the field, only to have the ball stolen by Mega Woman, who in turn gets it stolen by Tree Squirrel's unique vine snag which then sends it far back into Team Light's zone, but Fire Man moves to intercept!"

"Here it goes pardners! Fire Kick!" the flame-themed robot sent the ball rocketing back down the field straight for Team Wily's goal, only for the large Indian Buddha-like squirrel robot to catch it without so much as budging from the impact.

"SAVE BY GIANT SQUIRREL!"

"Spiny Squirrel!" the Wily team's goalie yelled as he threw it to the sixth and last member of the team, who curled into a spiked metal ball himself and began driving the ball just ahead of him towards Guts Man. "Take it away!"

"Oh, but here comes Elec Man for Team Light!"

"Not so fast!" the electrical robot master yelled as he charged up a thunderous kick to intercept the ball, the electrical discharge zapping and temporarily paralyzing Spiny Squirrel as the ball ricocheted off of him and towards the last member of Team Light.

"Go Rock! Whoo!" Cut Man and Ice Man cheered from the sidelines as the blue robot drove the ball back toward Giant Squirrel.

"Here I go!" Rock reared a leg back and took aim at the opposing goal. "Mega Ball!"

"GGGGOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAALLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL!"

12.5 (From OathToOblivion)

Five NetNavis!

There was a certain festive cheer over ACDC Town, and the resident Loopers were feeling the holiday spirit as well.

"Man, I love the holidays!" Lan cheered, walking from the last day of school before the winter break.

"Is that because you get to do nothing and then get presents?" Hub slyly asked.

Before Lan could protest this, the PET started ringing. "Lan, it's your phone!" Hub called out.

"Hello?"

"Lan."

"Oh, hey, Dad! What's up?" Lan wondered.

"Err...I don't really want to ask this of you during your winter break, but..." Yuichirou trailed off sheepishly.

"You need us to do something, right?" Lan wryly asked.

"Yes. SciLab was creating some special Navis for the holidays. Unfortunately, something went wrong during programming, and it looks like its irreversible. The Navis have gone berserk and spread all over the Net. I can confirm that they've left Electopia's network behind completely."

"You need us to go track them down then?"

"And delete them, yes. I'm sorry I need to ask this of you two-"

"It's fine, Dad! Shouldn't be that much of a problem."

"Alright. Tell your Mom I'll be home tomorrow, okay?"

"Alright." And with that, the phone call ended.

"Sounds like another weird Variant," Hub commented.

"Don't those usually only happen when we have Rock's version of Wily though?" Lan wondered.

"Well, regardless, we'd better look for them."

Hub crept through Sharo's Net Area, looking for one of the escaped Navis. He was being very careful, because you never knew when a Loop would throw crazy SearchMan at you. Well, it threw something at him alright, but not SearchMan. Something fell from the sky and almost beaned him on the head. Hub dodged, but was caught off guard when whatever it was exploded, knocking him back a few feet.

"HO HO HO!" a voice was heard. Hub sprung to his feet to see who was responsible. He had to blink when he saw what the responsible party looked like though. He was every bit the stereotypical Santa Claus, beard, paunch, and everything.

"Err, are you one of the Navis who left SciLab?" Hub cautiously asked.

"HO HO HO!" the Santa Claus Navi intoned, bringing out a gift-wrapped present. He tossed the present at Hub, who was forced to dodge before it exploded again.

"Who does this guy think he is, a Delibird?" Lan asked in confusion, referring to the Delivery Pokémon. But Hub had seen something, or rather a lack of something in the Santa Navi's eyes, and was a bit more serious.

"Lan...if this Navi ever had a mind, I don't think he has one anymore," Hub said quietly.

Lan registered that, closing his eyes. "I did wonder why Dad told us to just delete them," he remembered. He then opened his eyes. "At this point, deletion would just be a mercy kill."

"I don't have any problems with that, but I don't think I'm going to be able to get close enough," Hub pointed out, dodging more of the exploding presents.

"HO HO HO!"

"Oh put a sock in it!"

"What about a long range attack?" Lan asked.

"Don't think they'll have enough punch," Hub rejected, dodging another exploding present.

Lan hesitated, before removing a sealed container from his Pocket. A container containing certain Chips he wouldn't use except in an emergency. "What about...a Chaos Unison?" Lan asked slowly.

"...I don't like having to rely on that option, but we don't really have many other ones in this situation, do we?" Hub said rhetorically. "Alright, go ahead."

"Okay. Sacrifice DarkTornado for Chaos Unison. Unison Chip in," Lan said seriously.

"Chaos Unison: GyroChaos!" Hub announced. An image of GyroMan formed over him, at the same time as his Dark Soul was momentarily ejected from his body. MegaManDS turned his head around and gave Hub a nod, before leaping into him at the same time as the Unison was finishing, transforming Hub into the purple GyroChaos Chaos Unison. Hub then charged up his Buster.

"Charged Shot: DarkTornado!" he declared, shooting the purple tornado at the Santa Navi. It connected, sending the Santa Navi flying around the tornado. More tornadoes formed, buffeting the Santa Navi to and fro.

"HO HO HO-URK!" the Navi said, before exploding into bits of data. Hub ceased the attack, reverting to his base form.

"One down and four to go," he said quietly, before jacking out.

Hub was searching Yumland this time, wondering if all of the holiday Navis were going to be mindless and running off scraps of program. He felt sorry for them, honestly. They didn't know what they were doing, nor could they help it. It was just a sad tale all around. Suddenly, he heard an explosion and saw a bunch of NormalNavis go skyrocketing into the air. Fearing the worse, he immediately dashed forward to see what was going on.

He turned the corner and saw the cause. A Navi who looked like a Yumlander in fine clothes. He had a Buster formed and was shooting what looked like fireworks every which way. A group of Official Navis arrived, but were blasted away by the fireworks. This Navi didn't speak at all, simply shooting fireworks.

"Looks like this one's gone berserk too. I'll need speed to deal with this," Hub noted.

"Well, when you need speed, there's nothing better than that," Lan proclaimed, referring to one of Hub's Style Changes. Hub couldn't agree more.

"Style Change: WoodTurbo Style!" Hub declared, shifting into the Wood-attribute Style.

"BambooSword, Battle Chip in!" Lan declared, slotting the Chip in. The Wood-element sword formed on Hub's right arm. The wheels on his form spun, and he zoomed forward. The out-of-control Navi noticed him and attempted to shoot him with fireworks, but Hub zoomed around them and managed to skewer him on the BambooSword. The berserk Navi said nothing as he was deleted.

"That one didn't really have a lot of endurance," Hub noted, returning to his base form.

"Alright, that's two. Where's the next one?" Lan wondered, even as they began the search again.

This time, Hub was in Choina's Net Area, scouring the place for a rampaging holiday Navi. "Yeesh! When Dad said these guys went everywhere, he wasn't kidding!" Hub said, even as he looked. Lan was about to say something when he noticed something on the PET's screen.

"Wait, Hub, look out!" he yelled.

"Huh? ...AAAHH!" Hub cried, as he narrowly avoided getting scorched by a fireball. He turned to see the source, a Navi that looked a lot like one of those dragon costumes used during the Choinese New Year. The dragon Navi then proceeded to fire more fireballs at him, forcing Hub to duck for cover.

"This one's not saying anything either!" he declared.

"Maybe the Santa Navi was a fluke. Anyway, Battle Chips coming your way, Hub!" Lan declared, slotting them in.

Hub received them, and knew what to do. "AreaGrab!" he declared, warping behind the dragon Navi.

"Now! Program Advance: LifeSword 3!" he announced, sweeping at the dragon's back and deleting it.

"Phew! That one was close," Hub said, logging out of this part of the Net.

Hub couldn't help but blink when he saw the holiday Navi he had come across on the border between Netfrica and Netopia's Net Areas. It looked like a bipedal candle holder, complete with seven lit candles. The Navi's face was on the black candle in the middle. The three candles on the Navi's right were green, and the ones on its left were red. The outermost candles appeared to also double as the Navi's arms. This Navi also didn't say anything, instead shooting fire at him!

"Woah!" Hub yelled, jumping away from the fire. But then the holiday Navi, in a surprising show of speed, dashed behind him and lit him on fire.

"YEOW!" Hub complained, springing away from the fire. He quickly patted himself down to remove any remaining embers. "This guy's definitely on fire!"

"In that case, let's be fire fighters!" Lan said, opening the Cross menu on his PET. "Cross System: Engage! AquaCross!" he declared. Twin images of AquaMan formed in front of and behind Hub, moving onto him to cover him with AquaCross's armor!

Hub immediately started Charging up his Buster for rapid attacks! "Bubble Shot!" he declared, firing off quick Aqua-element shots at this kinara-like Navi. But this Navi was quick, leaping around the Bubble Shots and firing off more fire!

"Gkh!" Hub grunted as he was forced to disengage again. "Lan, I'm going to need some more firepower here!" he declared.

"Alright then! Falzar Beast Chip: download!" Lan declared, inserting the Chip in.

"HAAAAH!" Hub roared as he was covered in purple power. It flashed before dying down, revealing Hub's new form: the fusion of F-Beast and AquaCross known as AquaBeast.

"And now for the finish! Mega Cannon, Battle Chip in!" Lan declared. Hub received the Chip Data and converted it into AquaBeast's signature attack!

"Aqua Spiral!" he screeched, shooting out the aqua vortex at the Kwanzaa-themed Navi. The vortex picked it up and tossed the Navi around, deleting it. Hub sighed, powering down to normal again.

"Alright, where's that last Navi?" he wondered. Just then, the PET started going off. "Lan, it's Dad!" Hub declared.

"Yeah, Dad, what's up?" Lan wondered.

"...Lan, could you stop by SciLab real quickly? I've got something to show you," Yuichirou said mysteriously, before hanging up.

Lan blinked. "What's that about?" he wondered.

"Well, if Dad needs to show us something, it's probably important," Hub rationalized.

"Good point. Jack out!"

About half an hour later, Lan had arrived at SciLab and had walked into his father's office. "Hello? Dad?" he asked.

"Oh, Lan! Over here!" Yuichirou called. Lan walked over, curious what it was about.

"What's this about, Dad? I need to find that last Navi that escaped from SciLab," Lan pointed out.

"This has to do with that. That last Navi didn't have image data programmed for it yet, so I hadn't realized. It snuck back into SciLab's systems somehow and has covered the whole mainframe with snow," Yuichirou reported, turning on his monitor. Snow covered the entire Cyber World.

"Yikes. How are we supposed to stop it?" Hub questioned.

"Its core program must have manifested somewhere. You'll need to track it down. I'm sorry you need to do this much," their father apologized.

"Don't sweat it, Dad! This is nothing!" Hub reassured him.

"Alright, let's go! Jack in! MegaMan, Execute!" Lan declared, sending Hub into the Network.

"You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were shivering, Hub," Lan noted.

"It honestly feels cold in here. Can't you send me a FireSword or something?" Hub complained.

"I want to save it for this snow Navi, wherever he is."

"I'm still freezing-ACK!" Hub yelled as he tripped over something. Picking himself out of the snow, he turned around to see what it was. ...It looked a lot like-

"A lump of coal?" Hub asked in disbelief. Suddenly, the "lump of coal" started floating about the ground. Snow formed off the ground and coalesced around the lump of coal, forming into a familiar-looking enemy!

"Oh great...a Snow Devil," Hub said in slight fear. It did indeed look a lot like one of the Devil monsters Rock tended to face.

"Looks like we found him! Battle routine, set!" Lan declared.

"Execute!" Hub declared, before beginning combat. He started by firing at what was probably the core program of this could-have-been Navi. But snow covered it up, deflecting the Buster shots. Snow then was launched at Hub.

"Yikes!" he yelped, rolling out of the way. Of course, the snow followed after him, causing him to have to repeatedly dodge. Lan watched this, frantically trying to think of something. ...Oh! That could work!

"I've got an idea! Sacrifice FirePunch1 for Soul Unison! Unison Chip in!" Lan declared.

"Double Soul: NapalmSoul!" Hub declared, summoning an image of NapalmMan over top of him. It fused with him, giving him the armor of NapalmSoul.

"And now for the finish! FireBurn3: Triple Download!" Lan said, slotting the Chips in.

"Program Advance: Wide Burn 3!" Hub declared, shooting out a massive blast of fire from the Fire Vulcans on his back. This melted all of the snow nearby, causing the control program to fall to the ground. A quick StepSword later, and it was toast, causing all the snow in the SciLab computer system to disappear!

"Phew! Glad that's finished!" Hub sighed, reverting to normal.

"Well, looks like that's that! Time to enjoy the holidays!" Lan declared.

12.4 (From OathToOblivion)

Four Guardians

"Remind me, how did we get into this?" Sage Harpuia questioned his siblings.

Fairy Leviathan shrugged. "Because Master X said so?" she said rhetorically.

Hidden Phantom nodded. "Indeed. Master X's word is law," he reminded Harpuia.

"It still doesn't sit well with me," Harpuia insisted.

"Yeah!" Fighting Fefnir declared. "Zero's right there! Why shouldn't we just pummel him?!" he demanded, glaring at Zero. Of course, Zero was giving him a glare right back, trying to keep himself between the Guardians and Ciel.

"Why don't you just sit down and drink your damn tea already?" Zero coldly mocked, infuriating Fefnir.

"Why you-?!"

"Zero, Fefnir, cool it," X interjected, walking up from where he had gone.

"Er...yes, Master X," Fefnir unhappily said, sinking into his chair.

Zero just leaned back into his. "Whatever you say, X," he said, rolling his eyes and thinking back on the circumstances. This was one of those fairly common variant Loops where there was never a Copy X, and instead X just snapped. Obviously, since they were both Awake this Loop, that got defused real fast.

"Anyway, sorry I'm late. I had to finalize the peace treaty with the Resistance," X apologized.

Zero waved it off. "Like it matters considering you're you. Just sit down already," he said.

"I hope you're not trying to order Master X around, Zero," Harpuia said with narrowed eyes.

"Would it kill you to lighten up?" Zero snorted, causing Harpuia to tense up.

"Hey, I've got a question. Why are we even sitting at a table anyway?!" Fefnir angrily demanded, slamming the table and rattling the cutlery.

X gave him a withering look. "I wanted to have a family dinner. You four are based off my plans far more closely than any other Reploids, Ciel is a descendant of my creator..." *'This Loop anyway.'* "...and I've known Zero for so long, he's practically my brother," X finished listing.

"Cheers, X," Zero said, raising his glass. "How's the food, Ciel?" he asked, turning to the only human in the room.

Ciel started at that. "Oh! Um...it's...fine?" she half-asked.

X beamed. "Thanks! I worked hard on it!" he said.

"Master X, you made this? You didn't have to do that, I'd have done it for you!" Leviathan declared. Upon that remark, Harpuia immediately turned as green as his armor, looking the other way.

Fefnir snorted. "Who'd want to eat any of that sea crap you call food?" he mocked.

"What was that?" Leviathan asked in a dangerous tone. Unexpectedly, Phantom was the one to speak up next.

"I concur, it is most unpleasant when you cook, sister," he said in a blunt tone, causing Leviathan to almost steam.

"Oh really?! What about that charbroiled mess that Fefnir calls food?!" she demanded.

"Hey, you leave my grill out of this!"

"I'm not sure which is worse, seafood or grill," Harpuia said under his breath.

"Excuse me?!" Fefnir and Leviathan both yelled. The three of them proceeded to get into a large argument that was punctuated by deadpan remarks by Phantom. While Ciel looked completely gobsmacked by this, X simply held his head in his hands in shame.

"Heh. Kids," Zero chuckled, elbowing X.

"I'm definitely going to need more time to get them to behave better," X said in defeat.

Zero shrugged. "Hey, we've got all the time in the world," he pointed out unsubtly.

12.3 (From Bigou)

Three Metools

Roll and Rock were about to ask Dr. Light to rebuild them as combat robots, like they do around the start of most loops when suddenly, slamming the door, Auto entered their home hastily. "Don't worry everyone, AUTO TO THE RESCUE!"

Oblivious to the amount of facepalming his arrival triggered, the mechanical comic-relief continued. "I proudly present to you the three 'World-Saving Numbers'! First, WSN-001: Met-a-Man," He said, brandishing the picture of a Met wearing a familiar blue helmet.

His audience groaning from the bad pun didn't stop Auto from happily showing the picture of another Met, this one wearing a familiar yellow helmet, "WSN-002: Met-a-Woman, and…"

The would-be saviors-builder got interrupted by Rock, asking "Why did you only have pictures of them, Auto? Do you want US to build them for you?"

"No, no!" Assured Auto. "In fact, they are already on their way to fight Wily."

At this, Roll looked at Dr. Light, before speaking. "You know dad, I think you better rebuild Rock and me for combat…" At that her brother nodded vigorously.

While the Light family was retreating to the lab, the would-be saviors-builder yelled: "WAIT! YOU DIDN'T SEE WSN-000, I CALLED HIM **MET-A-KNIGHT!** " But no one heard him.

The Light twins were surprised. Each time they got to one of the stolen Robot Masters, they were already defeated. Did the current loop actually bless them with a version of Auto actually able to build useful robots?

Then, they got to Wily, only to find him captured by Meta Knight. Or rather, a Met disguised as Meta Knight. "Well, so much for a **competent** Auto…" Lamented Roll.

"See the bright side of things," reassured Rock, "At least Wily's reaction should be interesting."

12.2 (From Bigou)

Two Star-Crossed Loves

Roll, Rock and their father were going back from shopping. Christmas was near and they needed a new tree, along with new ornaments for it, since Auto accidentally burned it. Trying to improve the Christmas lights, Auto had created an aberration: LED based

flamethrowers. The lab had nearly burned down in the resulting multi-colored inferno.

They were in front of the last house before their own when Roll saw something strange. Why was Ms. Guide, their neighbor, wearing her Halloween costume?

Later that day, after checking Auto wouldn't try to improve the decorations of their new Christmas tree, she decided to go check on Ms. Guide herself. Sure, with how good her costume was, she has every right to be proud of it, but… "Wait a moment..." Roll narrowed her eyes and pulled a pair of sit-rep shades out to perform a more thorough scan. "That's... not a costume..." Roll whispered to herself. Since no Ghost Busters existed this loop, (she checked, just in case) she was going to take care of this herself.

Roll was in front of the Guides door, about to ring the bell, when Mr. Guide opened it, taking out the trash.

"Oh, hello… Err… Roll?" He said, unsure. "Do you need something?"

"Do you remember this shockingly realistic costume your wife wore for Halloween? It might seem silly but… I don't think it was a costume." Then, in her most serious tone, she added "I believe Ms. Guide **is** a demoness."

At this, the man facepalmed, muttering "…I should have knew it wouldn't work on robots…"

Then, he lowered himself to Roll level, looking at her in the eyes. "You're right, she is. But **what** she is don't change **who** she is. She is same Gwenaële Guide you always knew, truly."

"How… How can you be so sure of it?"

"That's a long story, one that should be told fully…" While saying this, Mr. Guide looked nostalgic. "For now, know that when she revealed the truth to me, at the time she got nothing to gain from it, and could have lost everything for doing it. But she still did it, she still revealed her true nature to me, and that was all I needed to trust her."

Then, getting up, he added "And before you ask, we weren't married back then."

Somehow, the Guides ended up revealing their secrets to Rock and Thomas Light too. At first, they doubted Gwenaël's sincerity, but the Guides still acted like any other couple. This was enough for Dr. Light to invite them to his Christmas Eve dinner.

That's when the Lights' last doubt crumbled, when an exhausted Ms. Guide fell asleep on their sofa, snuggled against her husband, taking care to not hurt him with her horns in the process.

Roll and Rock brought a blanket, which their father used to cover their guest, to help them stay warm during their sleep.

12.1 (From me to all of you)

Dr. Wily grumbled loudly as he stomped down towards the source of the disturbance that had set off his current Skull Fortress's alarms. The blaring was really getting on his nerves...

Why couldn't he just enjoy Christmas quietly planning his next attempt at world conquest?! Who in the world chose *Christmas Eve* to break into his fortress?!

Storming into the room, and ready to order a rain of fully weaponized hell on whoever was responsible for interrupting his long winter's nap, he was brought up short as he saw a rather large armored

mecha with an extra-thick skull-shaped plate over the cockpit and emblazoned with a very familiar emblem. His own.

"What in...? Computer, turn off that blasted alarm! I can't hear myself think!"

With blessed silence, he was now able to turn his full attention to the matter. It was clearly a machine designed in his preferred style, but he didn't remember building it. He certainly wouldn't have given it that ridiculously oversized bow-tied ribbon with a prominent card attached to one of the dangling ends... Wait, what?

Blinking, Dr. Wily approached the elaborately decorated card, noting that his name was on the front, and in the throes of curiosity opened it.

Merry Christmas, Dr. Wily!

Hope you like your present! We all worked very hard on it, so we hope you use it the next time you try and take over the world (while kindly overlooking the fact that we'd clearly know all its weak spots)! It's large, well-armored, very well armed with all the latest in state-of-the-art experimental (non-lethal) weaponry, and the best part is, it's powered by a coal furnace! Something we're all sure you have plenty of after the way you've behaved all year. Happy Holidays and we'll see you at your next attempt at conquest!

Best Wishes,

The Light Family.

Dr. Wily blinked owlishly several times as he stared at the card's contents before a grin began to split his face. A few moments later and his familiar mad cackling filled the halls of his fortress.

12.12) Leonite: And that's it. 11 Synchro Chips and one Dark Synchro Chip makes 12. Slur Soul is made manifest in the oddest of

ways. A darker ending, but a little nice I hope.

Also... for the heck of it, Omake (also by Leonite):

"Lan Hikari... tonight you'll be haunted by three ghosts!"

"No. I refuse to believe this."

"What, that Slur is pulling a Christmas Carol on you, or that she knows a Christmas Carol?"

"Yes."

12.11) Ow, my brain.

12.10) If you think this is freaking the Maverick Hunters out now, wait until the Sigmas start singing the Boar's Head Carol (suggested by katfairy post-completion).

12.9) Sniper Joe plus the traditional eight masters equals nine. Work in progress.

12.8) You know, Christmas may be my winter holiday of choice, but that song by Peter, Paul, and Mary is quite possibly my all-time favorite holiday song.

12.7) Obviously a variant where reploids mimic human biology as well as mental ability.

12.6) fractalman wrote Ratoskr, the divine squirrel who runs messages up and down Yggdrasil in Norse mythology, causing a massive squirrel infestation of all levels of Yggdrasil. Including adminspace. We had a lot of fun making squirrely Loops.

12.5) The five holiday navis are based on:

Santa Claus - Aka St. Nicholas, Kris Kringle, that nice old guy who goes around in the dead of winter giving people presents, etc. Would you believe that Christmas used to be considered a pagan holiday

and was forbidden by certain Christian sects? Like a number of mainline holidays, its origins are actually Celtic.

Deepavali/Diwali - An Indian celebration (and I mean *India* , not Native North America) lasting five days that focuses on the victory of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, good over evil, and hope over despair. There are, of course, plenty of fireworks to be had.

Chinese New Year - The Chinese love their dragons, and their new year celebration (usually early February) is about the culture's biggest party of the year and lasts for about two weeks. Seriously. The Chinese love their new year like New Orleans loves Mardi Gras.

Kwanzaa - No, not Chanukah. The holiday developed by the African-American culture to celebrate their African heritage. Started in 1965 by Maulana Karenga.

Snow Devil - This is not the snowman I wanted to build!

12.4) Ah, family and holidays. Those two things we keep insisting are supposed to mix.

12.3) Huh… What do you know… Auto made something that worked… Completely by accident.

12.2) Bigou has stated that Mr. and Mrs. Guide are original characters of his. Just in case you wondered where they came from. They aren't loopers.

12.1) And a Machine for Dr. Wily!

12.0 (Oooo, bonus!)

Blues stared out over the city and thought.

Look at them all. Scuttling about in their pathetic lives, never giving a second thought to the things your father did. So clueless... So fragile... so easy to break...

They were increasingly dark thoughts lately, but he could handle it. He didn't break that easily. Not anymore.

"So, it's true..." a voice behind him stated calmly. Blues turned to consider the approaching figure. Taller than he himself was, clad in red and white armor, and trailing a blond ponytail that almost reached the ground. "You really did survive to this era this Loop..."

Blues shrugged. "I decided to go somewhere and shut down to get away from everything. Not like I expected to suddenly come online again in the future instead of Waking Up in another Loop."

"And here I was going to ask what it felt like to outlive all the rest, but I guess that's a good enough answer."

Blues shrugged. It really hadn't been any different than Waking Up in a different Loop for him. Even if it *was* technically the same timeline.

"They're worried about you, you know," the other person stated. "Even X."

"I can't be trusted around them right now," Blues said simply.

Traitorous kin that they are...

"So they said you told them," the other said as he pulled out a familiar yellow object and held it out to Blues. "It's why I volunteered to give this back."

Blues blinked as he stared at it.

An image of Dr. Light trying to choke him with it flashed through his mind, warring with the image of Dr. Light happily buying an identical scarf for him as a gift.

"Roll said you never came back for it after Thanksgiving that year. Sent it along to the future when she learned you'd shut yourself down so we could return it for her."

"Thanks..." Blues said as he accepted the scarf and wrapped it around his currently bare neck. "Zero..."

"It's funny," the Wily-built reploid noted. "You think you're a danger to them, but you're fine around me."

"You're not family... I can handle it around anyone else."

You keep telling yourself that. Hehehe...

"As you say," Zero sighed. "Just know that we're here for you if you need it. *All* of us."

"Thanks. That... That helps more than you know."

Mega Loops: Harry New Year

Author's Note: The title pun crossed my mind early this morning and reminded me that I had this sitting in my 'to-be-compiled' collection. A fused Loop between Harry Potter and classic Mega Man, where the Lights and their friends/foes derail pretty much everything by simply being themselves. No real acting on loop-born foreknowledge needed.

Mega Loops: A Harry Hew Year

"You dare come into our house and tell us how to conduct our affairs!" Vernon Dursley yelled at the significantly less-portly but respectably older man. "I'll see you in court over this! I'll rake you over the coals and take you for everything you're worth you freak-lover!"

"You will try," Dr. Light simply glared back. "And when you fail I shall take great pleasure in exposing your abuse of this boy to the whole world. You will be shamed across entire nations for your treatment of him, and he will *still* remain with me as my charge and adopted son. Good. Day."

Vernon tried to stomp after the scientist, but what appeared to be a young boy in blue stepped in front of him and held him back with absolutely no effort whatsoever.

"I'm sorry," Rock told the thrashing lunatic patiently as the man proceeded to hurt his hands on Rock's metal armor, "but I can't let you do that."

"Come along, Harry," Roll smiled down at the young boy. "We're going to where these ill-tempered gits can't ever hurt you anymore."

"Okay," a shy Harry allowed the pretty metal lady to lead him away from the Dursley household and to his new home.

Vernon Dursley would later ignore Dr. Light's warning, as well as anything resembling common sense. In the end, he and his family had to change their names and move to parts unknown to escape the stigma they brought upon themselves.

Harry believed that Dr. Light was easily among the top ten alternative parental figures he'd ever ended up with, and shaping up to be a serious contender for the top three. It was a rare individual who could browbeat Albus Dumbledore in a pure battle of wills and, unlike that fused Loop where he was raised by Tony Stark, the guy didn't need to bring physical gods to back the intimidation factor. No, Dr. Light bloody well *made his own from scratch* .

Tony Stark may have been a cross between Leonardo da Vinci and a billionaire playboy, but Dr. Light turned out to be a cross between Leonardo da Vinci and Angus bloody MacGyver with a dash of Bruce Lee thrown in for seasoning. He may be up there in years, but give him a junkyard and some time to tinker and Harry was willing to bet that Dr. Light could take out half the Death Munchers by himself. Along with a side of Ministry lackeys and a dash of the Order for good measure.

Harry's Awakening this Loop had been something of a gradual affair, and he was having trouble pinpointing where he went from partially Awake to completely Awake. It made for a much less jarring entry into the Loop in his opinion and one of the fringe benefits was that he had much clearer Loop memories to draw on as a result. Like the one where Dr. Light had stared down Dumbledore at his finest, *dared* the old manipulator to try something, and promptly dropped him like a sack of week-old potatoes when Dumbledore had taken him up on the offer. Thus was it proven that the technology and mind of Dr. Light was superior to the magic and mind possessed by the wizard-of-many-flowery-titles-that-sounded-more-impressive-than-they-really-were. Harry was going to treasure the look on the old coot's

face when he got knocked on his arse by a muggle for many Loops to come.

But the most amazing thing about this particular fused Loop was that the whole 'Boy-Who-Lived' routine was being overshadowed by his adopted robotic siblings. Sure, Harry had defeated a dark lord as a baby, but Rock and Roll had beaten back about a dozen attempts to take over the world, any one of which would have left old Moldyshorts green with envy. In significantly fewer years.

The wizarding world could try and look down on the muggle world and their technology all they wanted, but being knighted by the Queen commanded respect anywhere. There were a few of the Ancient and Noble houses that couldn't claim such a thing anywhere in their ancestry much less recently. He couldn't wait to see the looks on the faces of the purebloods when his adopted family was introduced with 'Sir' and 'Dame' attached.

Harry had to admit, it would be nice to have his reputation overshadowed by someone else in his age bracket for once.

If he played his cards right, he could possibly even get through the whole seven years without having to perform a single act of heroism.

"I've got to ask," Harry said to Rock as he was packing for Hogwarts. "How the heck are you going to even function in Hogwarts much less study magic. I don't really recall Dr. Light making something to counteract the way high concentrations of magic can interfere with technology."

"That hasn't been a problem for us for a while," Rock replied. "In our baseline, we've got an alien supercomputer named Ra Moon that can make an EM field so powerful that it becomes toxic and eventually lethal to biological lifeforms if not stopped. Even when dad's not Awake, he can reliably access the knowledge of how to counteract its effects on electronics. Then there's the fact that we've encountered a hostile variant of Equestria known as The Conversion

Bureau which has a magical barrier that disintegrates all human technology it touches. Wily invented a method which let his robots literally walk right through it without a scratch and Roll and I copied it from them. So, even if we didn't have dad's new project, the magical saturation of Hogwarts wouldn't really be an issue."

"New project?" Harry asked, rather intrigued.

"Dad managed to invent a magical core for robots," Rock smirked. "Roll and I are just as magical as any of your classmates now. The Hogwarts letters prove it. What's really going to be interesting is the fact that both Tempo and Bass also have them. Though Bass sort of stole his."

"How do you 'sort of' steal something like that?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Aside from the fact that dad deliberately made four of them after Blues said he didn't want one? He left it in plain sight, with installation instructions and everything, that time Bass raided the lab," Rock answered. "Dad all but engraved an invitation for Bass to take it."

"So, what's your plan for dealing with Dr. Wily existing in a Loop where magical knowledge is readily available once he learns how to get it?" Harry asked after the compartment door was closed. The two had told him about Dr. Wily's rather interesting, and random, 'Dreaming' state.

"Point him and Voldemort at each other and sell popcorn," Roll shrugged.

Rock picked up where his sister left off. "While we'd prefer Wily not get access to magical knowledge that he'll likely remember some future Loop when it's really inconvenient for us, the fact is that trying to keep him from it in a world like this one just isn't feasible. Better to just let his ego take care of your usual problem and enjoy the show."

'Ah, the sorting,' Harry mused to himself. *'That precious time before most of the school even knows who I am and the crossroads for how I decide to spend most of my Loops.'*

The sorting was well underway, with baseline house assignments for pretty much everyone so far. But now they were getting to the first sorting of the new people that normally didn't exist in this reality.

"Lalinde, Tempo!" McGonagall called out, prompting a stoic girl with long brown hair to step forward.

The hat seemed to *blink* as it was placed on the girl's head, as if it were totally and completely surprised by what was in the girl's mind. "Fascinating," it mumbled in a way that others could just barely hear, prompting a few curious looks from others in the room. "Absolutely fascinating..."

Harry, for his part, suppressed his desire to snicker loudly. He was one of the few in the room that knew, or even suspected, Tempo was a robot.

Several long seconds went by before the hat yelled out "Gryffindor!"

Su Li went next and was sorted, as usual, into Ravenclaw. The next name though caused something of a stir.

"Light, Rock. Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order."

Harry was so glad he'd thought to put up magically remote controlled cameras beforehand in strategic locations. It wasn't often you saw every student at Hogwarts gape like that.

"Ravenclaw!" the hat's proclamation broke the student body's stupefaction. A moment later, the Ravenclaw table went absolutely nuts as the fact that they had a titled knight in their house sunk in. Rock, for his part, just looked rather sheepish as he joined his new housemates.

"Light, Roll. Dame Commander of the Royal Victorian Order."

Harry noted that the rampant gaping was just as funny the second time. This was going in his pensieve collection for certain.

"Hufflepuff!" the hat declared, and the house of students so often degraded as having nothing special going for them erupted in cheers of their own, not a few of which were just a little smug in Harry's opinion.

His own sorting went as usual, though the fact that his adopted brother and sister led the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables in cheering as well actually made him blush a bit.

He could also see the Slytherin table grumbling over the fact that they weren't getting anything more prestigious than the usual pureblood children like Malfoy.

The sorting proceeded as normal up until Ron Weasley got sorted into Gryffindor with him, and then the one person Harry was looking forward to being sorted was called.

"Wily, Bass!"

As the spiky-haired boy in question strode up to the stool with an arrogant swagger Draco could only *hope* to emulate, Harry knew exactly where the dark rival of the Light twins was going to end up. What he was *really* looking forward to were the reactions of the boy's new housemates.

The sorting hat landed on Bass's head and a moment later, the hat began to chuckle in a way that made several people somewhat nervous. The matching grin on Bass's face didn't help the situation.

"He-he-he... Slytherin!" the hat called out.

Harry gave Slytherin house a week of attempting to 'put the new guy in his place' before Bass had them all too terrified to so much as say

anything against him.

Professor Quirrell slipped into the third floor corridor on the left hand side with a magic harp in tow, ready to put the cerberus to sleep and continue on to procure the Stone for his master.

"Going somewhere?" a voice called out to him from within the room.

Quirrell whirled about, and spotted a young lad clad in what seemed to be red and gray armor with shaded glasses in the helmet, a yellow scarf around his neck, and an oblong shield strapped to his back. Just standing in the middle of the room where the cerberus should have been with his arms crossed in challenge.

"Who are you?" Quirrell snarled, quite forgetting his instrument in his surprise and anger. "What are you doing here? This area is restricted!"

"Indeed it is," the boy said. "Which makes me wonder why you're here. You see, my brother and sister told me someone had tried to break in here and steal something the school was guarding, so I invited myself in to see if this person would try again."

"You've..." Quirrell tried to process that. "You've been in here since Halloween?"

"Off and on," the boy replied. "I made coming here a priority when I heard the headmaster was suddenly being called away on business. Mostly I've been dropping in to help with the maintenance of the security, and getting to know Fluffy of course. I volunteered to bring his food and water and just stuck around most days to keep him company for a while. Dogs can get lonely when left alone in a room for such a long time, you know."

Quirrell was suddenly aware of a low growling sound coming from behind the boy that was getting louder as the cerberus began to stalk out of the shadows it had been hiding in.

"Huh," the boy scratched his chin. "It sounds like he recognizes you. Guess that makes you the burglar."

Quirrell whipped around to activate the magic harp, but the boy let out a sharp whistle and the cerberus pounced faster than the wizard could cast.

Harry blinked as he saw Bass stroll by in a set of robes that looked more like they belonged on a biker than a student of Hogwarts.

"Hey, Bass?" he'd called out to the robotic Slytherin before he could engage his better judgement.

"Yeah?" the rival of Rock sneered back.

"I noticed your robes," Harry decided to forge forward and hope for the best.

"Like 'em?" Bass grinned smugly. "I had them custom made down in Hogsmead with some material I 'acquired' recently. Just got the delivery this morning."

"What are they made of?" Harry asked, genuinely curious. The material looked a little familiar...

"Basilisk hide. Some magic diary told me where to find the beast before I incinerated it."

Harry blinked and managed to keep his snickering inside his own head. No wonder there hadn't been any attacks this year!

"And what I want to know, Minister," Dr. Light; holder of the Order of the Companions of Honour, the Order of Merit, the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, and the Royal Victorian Order; glared right back at the wizard politician, "is precisely why you have not produced the record of Mr. Black's trial. Particularly in light of the fact

that the man he supposedly murdered has been discovered living in an illegal animagus form for the last several years in the home of one of your own employees! How many times has this man gained unrestricted access to the ministry?! *Do your people not have ways to detect the simple morphic resonance signature that such a transformation produces?!* ***What the bloody hell do you people actually do in here?!"***

Amelia Bones was trying very hard not to laugh as Cornelius Fudge was dressed down by a muggle in a manner that would do her Auror Academy instructor proud. Honest.

Dr. Thomas Light, decorated British citizen and brilliant scientist, sat in the office of one Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He stared evenly at the elderly wizard, betraying no emotion.

Their first meeting had not gone well. Professor Dumbledore had shown up at his home 'requesting' that Harry be returned to his abusive relatives. When Dr. Light had, as politely as possible and in no uncertain terms, told him 'no', the man had tried to cast some manner of spell. Dr. Light's automated defenses had immediately sensed the energy buildup and dropped the man before he even finished the word. Their professional relationship had been... strained since then.

"I would first like to apologize," Professor Dumbledore offered, "for how I conducted myself when first we met. I acted very rashly in regards to you and your stated intentions. Do know that I have always tried to work for the greater good."

"As have I," Dr. Light's expression didn't change. "However, I have never seen the need to leave anyone else to suffer as a result of my pursuing it. I could never in good conscience leave the boy in such a home after what I witnessed, no matter what good I thought would come of it. That family would have never done right by him."

"You have done a fine job of raising the boy," Dumbledore admitted. "Far better than I could have hoped for. I hope you will accept my apology, Sir Light."

"I will, in the spirit it was offered," Dr. Light allowed. "If only because I wish Harry to learn the virtues of forgiveness. Now, I doubt either of us believes that an apology was the only reason you called me here."

"Indeed," Dumbledore admitted. "I have heard of your efforts that led to Sirius Black ultimately being released. I have also heard about the unfortunate escape of one Peter Pettigrew. The minister, in his 'infinite' wisdom, has seen fit to respond to this state of affairs by ordering a 'special guard' placed around Hogwarts in the belief that Pettigrew may attempt to infiltrate the castle and harm Harry because of the prophecy that he will eventually defeat Voldemort."

"Prophecies are simply warnings of things that may happen," Dr. Light philosophized. "How we come to fulfill them or thwart them is through our own choices and our choices alone."

"Wise words," Dumbledore smiled. "However, the 'guards' the minister chooses to employ may likely do more harm to Harry and everyone in the school than could befall them were they not here. I would like to ask your help in protecting the students from them."

"What exactly are these guards anyway?" Dr. Light inquired.

"They are called Dementors, spirits of despair who inhabit the darkest and bleakest parts of the world," Dumbledore admitted. "They suck the happiness and joy out of the air until simply living is an emotional torture beyond imagining. The ministry uses them to guard Azkaban, the wizard prison."

"Where Mr. Black was imprisoned for over a decade without trial?!" Dr. Light exclaimed in shock. "That is barbaric!"

"I am in full agreement," Dumbledore placated. "However, I am but one voice drowned out by many others who insist the practice is kept. What I would ask of you is to apply your thoroughly unique skills and knowledge to devising a way to keep them off the grounds and prevent them from harming the students. For they very well could should precautions not be taken. They are not moral creatures in the slightest."

Dr. Light stared at the wizard intensely. "Can you get me one to study?"

"I believe I can," Dumbledore promised.

"Then I will begin preparations immediately."

Harry was immensely enjoying the Triwizard Tournament. For one thing, it was the first time in a great many Loops – he'd lost track of even an estimate of just how many – that he wasn't actually a champion. No, that distinction had gone to Rock of Ravenclaw, with Roll of Hufflepuff serving as the official Hogwarts champion.

But what really sold it for him was how his adopted siblings were handling the dragon task.

Rock had gotten his older brother's shield loaned to him and had pretty much strolled up to the nest, using the shield to hold back the dragon's firebreath to its confusion, dodged a claw swipe by sliding under it and plucked up the egg as casually as one would pick up an item at the store. A couple of hops impossible for a human without magical aid, and he was out of the ring without needing to cast so much as a single spell.

And then it was Roll's turn.

If the entire stands had stared with complete lack of comprehension when she'd come out with a muggle-style broom, they'd positively goggled when she'd whacked the dragon over the snout with it while

shouting admonishments to behave. And with the dragon now whimpering in a subdued manner, Harry was sure that most of the crowd had lost the ability to form conscious thought.

But then, Harry himself couldn't stop laughing.

Harry smiled to himself as he danced with Ginny at the Yule Ball. No pressures to be the hero so far, no entry into the Triwizard, just plenty of time to kick back, relax, and have a bloody normal relationship with a pretty girl for a change.

And get into some of the trouble typical of Hogwarts youth of course. It was *very* obvious this Loop that Ginny was related to Fred and George.

"Now," Dolores Umbridge sneered at the abomination in front of her, "you will write 'I must not disrupt class with pointless questions' until it *sinks in* . Am I clear?"

Personally, the student in question wasn't sure what was so pointless about asking, among other things she felt were in need of addressing, how they were supposed to evaluate their practical knowledge of the spells covered if they never practiced casting them. Instead, she decided to point out something else painfully obvious that was more immediately important. "Professor Umbridge, you have provided me with no ink to write with."

The current DADA teacher, in a looser sense of the term than should ever be allowed if one asked around, glared at the... *thing* which in her opinion had no place in the school, the world of magic, or for that matter existing in the first place. "That will not be a problem. Now do as instructed."

Tempo Lalinde of Gryffindor blinked at the odd declaration, but shrugged and began to write with the inkless quill as instructed.

Blood Quills are restricted items for a reason, mostly due to the potentially harmful magic that powers them, but also partly due to a little-known flaw they possess. Few know it exists and fewer still can invoke this flaw to their benefit. But the quartet of robotic students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry were among the few who could exploit it without even trying.

You see, Blood Quills normally write in the blood of the one who holds them, making them a staple of magically binding contracts. However, when they can't access the blood of the writer, they automatically seek the next available source.

It was bad fortune for Deloris Umbridge that Tempo, being a robot, did not possess blood of her own and there was no other source closer than the self-proclaimed High Inquisitor herself. It was worse fortune that the female robot master was fully capable of defending herself when Umbridge decided to attack on the assumption that the rapid etching of dark magic onto her skin, due to Tempo writing as fast as her servos could safely go in the hopes of getting this over with sooner, was deliberate on Tempo's part.

But the cherry on this humiliation sundae in Harry's opinion, when he was later asked, was that Tempo had powerful friends in the Light family who came down on Umbridge like a ton of bricks when she tried to press the issue.

Harry read the Daily Prophet with absolute glee.

Voldemort had somehow managed to get a body anyway last year, and last night he'd tried to infiltrate and attack the ministry for the prophecy surrounding himself and Harry.

And the Light-made robot masters had been waiting for him.

Watching the full front page spread of the ensuing melee as Dr. Light's robots essentially schooled the entire force of Death Eaters, non-lethally even, just refused to get old. He was going to have to

frame and enchant this for permanent storage in his subspace pocket.

Hmm... Better get extra copies just in case.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort screamed as he cast the lethal spell at the upstart muggle scientist, only to watch in confusion as the man began sparking from the impact area instead of falling over dead.

"Foolish little wizard!" the damaged, but still standing, robot double of Dr. Wily declared. "Did you really think I would not be prepared for your pathetic parlor tricks?"

-) House assignments: Tempo to Gryffindor, Rock to Ravenclaw, Roll to Hufflepuff, and Bass to Slytherin (who are nearly all too terrified to try and attack him inside a week). Blues occasionally hangs out around Hogsmeade, having elected not to have a magical core installed but still having no trouble with the magical saturation of the area.

Omake) Roll: *Whack* Bad dragon! Sit!

Bonus) Shortly after this was originally written, some debate sprang up regarding the possible looping status of Dumbledore and how he was originally flanderized by Innortal. That prompted me to write the following, which was quickly adopted as Looping canon for Dumbledore:

Harry Potter was once again in the office of Albus Dumbledore, an event not at all uncommon in his Loops. The difference was... Dumbledore was Awake.

Harry had... bad memories of trying to convince the aging headmaster of the nature of the Loops early on. Memories of things he hadn't quite forgiven Dumbledore for even after all this time. Sure,

he'd reconciled with the old man a few times. Once or twice he'd even convinced the headmaster of the trauma other versions of himself had inflicted on him and had gotten a heartfelt apology.

But it had never stuck. It had been back to Unawake Dumbledores who were hit-or-miss in regards to if they were secretly evil overlords, incompetent idiots, well-meaning goofs, more-or-less decent manipulators who thought they had an omniscient morality license, or genuinely good and intelligent wizards who had nonetheless screwed up somewhere. It was maddening. He *wanted* to forgive Dumbledore, to tell him that the good had outweighed the bad over the course of the Loops, but there was no version of the man who made such forgiveness *mean* anything.

In the end, he'd held on to the hurt and bitterness just to keep from going even more insane.

But here was a version of Dumbledore who could remember a reconciliation, and Harry had no idea if he even deserved the chance. He'd been wary. Too many times he had been hurt to risk a permanent, and possibly eternal, enmity with the headmaster.

"I understand I owe you a rather thorough apology," Dumbledore began. "When I first began 'looping' as it were, I was not too much unlike whatever versions of myself earned your enmity. I was determined to see the prophecy through to its end, and very much overly confident that I, and I alone, knew what was best. I am thankful to say that you thwarted my efforts at every turn. And often in ways I can now admit were rather amusing."

"You..." Harry started, not entirely sure how he was reacting.

"Please allow me to finish, Harry," Dumbledore placated. "Then you may pass whatever judgement you deem fit."

Harry kept his silence, and waited.

"It all came to a head, I'm afraid, when a rather fascinating muggle scientist whisked you away from the Dursleys and adopted you. I was growing very much frustrated with my inability to set you on the path to fulfilling the prophecy, and I did something quite ill-advised and attempted to use my magic to force events to go how I wished them to."

Harry winced. That sounded like Setsuna Syndrome, a term Usagi had coined way back when the Loops were new and she sometimes had to deal with an Unawake Setsuna Meiou, aka Sailor Pluto. Setsuna was a force who, some Loops, kept setting herself at odds with the blonde Anchor whenever she derailed the timeline with Loop knowledge or abilities. Setsuna Syndrome was attributed to those who were overly dedicated to the preservation of baseline events to the point of obsession, often Unawake but still Loop Aware entities, believing that even small deviations carried unthinkable consequences. It was something most loopers tended to get over eventually, but some overcompensated and risked diving towards Sakura Syndrome instead, the state of a looper believing that *no* action they undertook, no matter how vile or depraved, carried *any* consequences due to the nature of the Loops.

"Fortunately, as I would come to learn," Dumbledore continued, "this 'Dr. Light' managed to best me with nothing more than a few wise precautions he had taken and then proceeded to raise you into a fine young man despite my protests. Not only that, but his actions during that particular Loop came to show me what it really meant to work for the greater good. He did everything in his power to do right by as many as possible, and above all, he sought that none would suffer in his quest to do right that did not bring it upon themselves with their own actions. He and his did more to aid the worlds of both muggles and wizards in just over a decade than I and mine have managed to accomplish in my entire lifetime. Any of them. It was a humbling experience."

Harry's eyes widened. "You were Awake for that?!"

"That is the term you use, is it not?" Dumbledore asked rhetorically. "In fact, I was. And it was the most enlightening series of events I could have ever hoped for. I was humbled by a man who not only did not lord his victory over me like many would, he was willing to forgive my folly and even work with me towards a future brighter than I ever dared hope possible."

"Yeah," Harry admitted. The man had developed countermeasures against the dementors more effective than anything Harry had possessed prior to at least triple digits in the Loops. In under a month and with no prior understanding of the creatures. "Though the Wily guy they brought with them was a handful."

"Indeed. I was quite entertained by how he consistently defeated Mr. Riddle whenever they clashed. Speaking of which, 'Moldyshorts' Harry?" Dumbledore chuckled. "While I am pleased that you still do not fear Tom's chosen name, that is rather childish."

"I'm technically older than humanity by now," Harry groused. "I'm allowed to be childish on occasion."

"Oh, I understand the appeal," Dumbledore smiled. "Did you know that in my battle with Grindlewald, which I have yet to repeat, the two of us; adult wizards at the height of our power and influence, dueling to the death; stood there on the battlefield calling each other things like 'dung-head' in between lethal spells? I can assure you that has never been mentioned in the history books. Such enmity for one who wishes you dead is only human. I am rather more concerned that your grudge against Professor Snape does not seem to have abated."

Harry took a deep breath. "Disregarding the fact that I tend to bear the brunt of his unresolved rivalry with my father anew when a Loop restarts, 'professor' Snape is often a much poorer teacher than a potionmaster," Harry informed the looping headmaster, mentally disregarding those rare Loops where a variant Snape was in fact quite competent. Like the one where he acted like the kind of high school chemistry teacher who taught his students how to make stink

bombs, and ended up Fred and George's absolute favorite member of the Hogwarts faculty. All those variants served to do was drive home how petty and uncaring the baseline Snape tended to be. "By several degrees of magnitude."

"Well," Dumbledore allowed, "I suppose that is only to be expected. As sensible as the man can be in some matters, I fear he is as bad as any other magic user in most. Now, to the matter of Delores Umbridge..."

"Hey," Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously, "I make *no* apologies for what happens to that woman after the things she tries most every Loop. So drop it right now."

"I was actually going to ask if you took pictures," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with amusement.

Harry gaped for a second before acknowledging the zinger. New looper or no, Dumbledore still had it. "Which volume?"

"How many do you have?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

Harry just grinned. He could work with this.

Mega Loops 13

Mega Loops 13

13.-1 (GammaTron)

When Zero Awoke to the Loop, he felt...weird. Looking down at himself and sorting through his Loop Memories, he learned that his name in this Loop was Zero Tucker and he was a member of Blood Gulch Outpost Alpha...And that he stole his currently aqua-colored armor from his dead Captain.

"Hey! You feeling Awake now?" looking up, he saw a soldier in cobalt armor.

"Wait. You're Looping?" Zero asked.

"Yeah. Name's Leonard Church," the soldier informed, "Glad to see you didn't switch places with me for this Loop."

"Huh?" Zero raised a brow.

"Come on. It's time to spy on the Red Team. Simmons got replaced by this other guy. Haven't had a chance to meet him yet, but I know that he's most likely Awake and just decided to play along," Church informed as he picked up a sniper rifle, "By the way; when we meet an alien called 'Crunchbite,' *don't* have your back to him. Otherwise, I have to deal with a damn alien baby again. And I don't want to deal with a baby alien that isn't Junior, even if Junior isn't even Looping yet."

"What?"

"Come on already!" Church snapped before pushing Zero towards a path going to a higher area of the box canyon.

Zero quickly sent out a signal. He sighed in relief when he got a response. X was apparently the other soldier. ...Aw crud.

"Is this really all you do in a Baseline?" X asked, wearing a maroon version of his armor, the helmet replaced with the same type the orange soldier he was standing near wore.

"Yep," the soldier replied, having awoke a few hours ago, "So, congrats, Mega Man X, and welcome to the Red VS Blue Loop. So long as no one else is Awake, we'll most likely go through a baseline."

"Actually, I just received a signal from my friend, Zero."

"Zero? Dude, if Tucker's here and Awake, *don't* let him meet Zero," Grif advised as he stood straight up, "He's a straight fanboy of the Mega Man Zero series and always wanted to get the Z-Saber and its upgrades *with* Zero's autograph on it."

"...Is he?"

"No clue. No one here spies on the Blue Team," Grif shrugged, "Normally, it's them who spy on us, but we normally just talk."

"About what?" X asked.

"...Hey, X?"

"Hm?"

"You ever wonder why we're here?" Grif asked.

7.7.7 continued (Hubris Plus)

Pitchblende Part 4: Horror in the House of Light

Albert Wily considered himself, at heart, a simple man. Oh, his genius was beyond the comprehension of those puffed up fools who thought themselves his peers, but all he *really* wanted was to be recognized as the genius he was.

World conquest would just be a natural side effect of everyone realizing that he *should* be in charge.

But his most recent plan went a bit... *beyond* that scope. The meteorite sample had unlocked untold possibilities, given him insight into realms of science yet unknown. Twice now the world had refused his brilliance, and his new pet had shown him that they always would. It had also shown him that 'always' was a flexible term.

Since the fault couldn't possibly be his own, it was obvious the world was in error. He would simply fix it.

Gently, he lowered the polished sphere of meteorite into the devil-core and sealed the device. It was almost comical how easily he'd been able to adapt Yoku Block phase shift technology to exploit and control the object's extraordinary properties.

"Damn headaches," he muttered, rubbing at his scalp with one hand while the other powered up the core. "Need to get more sleep."

As the last diagnostic passed a line of oozing blue sliced across the machine's surface, bisecting it, before springing open to reveal a sickly yellow eyeball, its center occupied by a crimson iris with a rectangular black pupil. An instant later every inch of the core not taken up by eye-ball exploded in blue tendrils, twining around one another, fusing at seemingly random intervals, branching off again, and occasionally growing what appeared to be jagged teeth.

Minutes later the writhing mass had assumed something approximating a biped shape. Its chest was occupied by the single massive eye, as was typical of Wily's Devil series, but was otherwise unrecognizable as something conceived by a mortal mind. One of its

'arms' was a noodly length of tentacle a meter thick at the base that terminated in five more wavering tendrils that almost looked like a hand. The other was a massive bony appendage, the whole of the forearm split by a toothy maw that seemed to pant gently as a dozen slender tongues lolled out between misshapen teeth. One leg was a crude stump better suited for clubbing than walking, while the other was composed of several tendrils wrapped around one another. Its flesh was dotted with tumescent bubbles of growth waiting to burst forth into yet more hideous anatomy.

"SPLORT," it burbled as it stared dully down at the aged human before it.

"A little more asymmetrical than I'd like," Wily mused, scratching his chin. "But it'll do. Well, then, what are you waiting for?"

In response, the Shadow Devil raised the slavering mouth of its left arm, opened the jaw wide, and slammed it down around the doctor. A moment later it lifted the appendage to reveal nothing more than a crater in the temple's stone floor and teleported away in a column of sickly purple light.

"Thanks again for the help, guys," Robo said as he poured cement into the foundation of what would soon become Tesladyne Industries (a Light Labs subsidiary).

"Not a problem, Robo," Roll answered cheerfully as she carried a set of I-beams past.

"Yeah, it's always nice to use these abilities for their *intended* purposes," Rock added as he followed with a pallet of bricks and nodded towards where Guts Man was organizing the construction bots on the other side of the site. He and his sister had rescanned the huge robot earlier to better help out.

"Still, I'd like to make it up to you," he insisted. They were only just starting but he could already tell how much faster this would go than

when he used human work crews. "How about voting rights? I'm *real* good at talking politicians into-"

Rock, Roll, Robo, and Guts all froze simultaneously as a burst of static sounded from their internal radios.

"Calling all DLNs!" Elec Man's voice called, "Light Labs is under attack and Doctor Light is–" They didn't bother to listen to the rest as the twins tossed aside their loads while Robo drew a lightning gun from subspace, not even bothering with his habitual grumble about the ZSAD.

As one, the three Robot Masters and singular Atomic Robot teleported home.

"–in immediate danger!" Elec Man shouted, electricity dancing from outstretched hands to strike the towering blue behemoth that had torn its way through the wall.

The creature gave a gurgling roar as it weathered the attack, gooey flesh quivering even as it stalwartly trudged towards its quarry. The Doctor himself was behind the power plant robot, searching his work tables frantically for something that might be of use. A prototype of Bond Man's glue gun had slowed the thing for a moment, but it seemed to have no compunctions about tearing away the ends of its limbs to soldier on. The remain were still writhing grotesquely from where they were anchored to the floor.

Suddenly it found its path interrupted by a nearly transparent wall, staring blankly at the obstacle for a moment before raising the clubish jaw of its left arm and slamming it into the barrier. It managed to repeat the action twice before Guts Man leaped in to interpose himself, catching the limb in his mighty arms. Even so, the one limb was almost as large as he was and he found his hydraulics straining as, inch by inch, the maw opened.

"That's right," Robo called out as he dropped the magnet beam he'd been holding with Rock and Roll in favor of firing his weapon of choice. "Gimme a smile, ugly!" The beast stumbled back, forgetting its prey for a moment as it turned to face the threat. "I was almost hoping that *wouldn't* work." Robo muttered before shouting, "Elec Man, match your Thunder Beam to my gun as close as you can!"

"Robo, what is this thing?" Rock asked as he switched to his Mega Buster.

"ROOOH , **"** the Shadow Devil warbled wetly as it caught sight of Atomic Robo, **"BOOOH!"**

"And why does it know your name?" Roll added as she followed suit.

"Kids, meet the Shadow from Beyond Time," Robo answered as they and Elec Man peppered the monster with lightning and buster fire. "Shadow, meet-"

"RAAAWK!" It roared anew, **"RHOOOL!"**

"Believe it or not, the fact that it hates you is a *good* sign," the older robot reassured them. "You three pin it down, I need to get close." He handed his gun to the twins so they could copy it and pulled a bulky brown bag from his pocket and slung it over his shoulder.

"This had better work, Robo," Elec Man stated as he renewed his assault, his attack much more effective now that he'd recalibrated to match the output of Robo's lightning gun. Guts Man had retreated to behind his fellow Robot Master to act as a final line of defense while Doctor Light started pulling power cables from the wall as he scrambled to assemble a scaled up version of the only thing that seemed to work.

Under fire from three lightning guns designed specifically for the purpose, the Shadow finally halted its forward advance, throwing up its arms defensively as it sizzled. New and gruesome appendages continued to burst from its flesh, flailing and writhing for only an

instant before being ablated away. Still, the trio weren't in any position to cover it from all angles, those growths emerging on its back twitching forth unimpeded, its mass steadily growing.

Suddenly, as Robo bolted across the lab, the creature turned and charged away from the electric salvo, bashing down a wall and vanishing through the resulting hole.

"No no *no* ," the machine groaned glancing about frantically. "Over or under? Sideways? Dammit, I should have checked on the poles at some point..."

"It's running away," Elec Man pointed out. "Isn't that a *good* thing?"

"The Shadow treats geometry like a bad joke," he answered. "Just because it's running in the opposite direction doesn't mean it's running awa-"

The ceiling at the far end of the room exploded downwards as the beast barreled through it. The debris blasted Doctor Light off his feet even as Guts seized the thing about the waist and desperately hauled back on it. For all his strength, the creature was stronger. Step by step it approached the Doctor, jaw snapping hungrily at the scrabbling scientist.

" *Dad!* " The Light twins screamed in unison as one of the sinuous tongues wrapped around his ankle. In an instant he'd been dragged into the maw, teeth snapping shut around him.

"...No," Roll whispered, staring dumbfounded as Rock screwed up his eyes and clenched his fist. " *No!* " She repeated, this time in a shout, raising her buster and charging it to criticality.

"Wait!" Robo interrupted, slapping the barrel of her buster upwards as she fired. An instant later he found himself raising his hands defensively as she snarled at him. "We can still save him! That thing's eaten me a dozen times, I know how to go in after him, how to get him out, but you *have to trust me!* "

"...We're coming with you," Roll growled, Rock nodding firmly beside her.

"You'll need as much lightning as you can get," Elec Man added, sparks dancing from his fingers.

"You guys wanna hurry up?" Guts groaned from where he stood, still straining to restrain the monster. "Can't hold 'im much longer..." He screwed his eyes shut as one of the tentacles bursting from the thing's back probed at his face.

"Right," Robo answered, trotting up to the creature and ducking around its flailing limbs. "The Shadow isn't an animal, its skin isn't skin, it's a solid event horizon, the interface between two realities made physical. Mostly that means bad things, but the upshot is, if you can find a seam..." He jammed his hands into the Shadow's torso just beneath the eye, fingers wriggling into pseudo-flesh before tearing it apart. In the rip in the skin of the world was a whiteness that wasn't light so much as an absence of darkness.

"Stay close, and if you see another you, try to have a little dignity."

The four robots slipped through the gap, and the Shadow gave a gurgle that could almost be a laugh as the hole snapped shut. With a twitch, it hurled Guts Man across the room and, with what could only be described as inevitability, began to grow.

13.0 (Bigou)

This time again, Weil was defeated by Zero. But when the mad man looked at his damaged body, he couldn't believe what he saw.

"I'm the Great-eat-eat Dr. Al-Al-Al-Albert W. Weil! I **can't** -an't-an't be a ro-ro-ro-ro-ro-ro-ro-ro-ro- **robot!** "

"Dr. Weil turned out to be the Wily A.I., who got corrupted and unconsciously uploaded itself in a damaged Wily-bot," explained Zero. "His 'cyborg-look' being the result of the dubious repairs he did. Honestly, I fear the day Wily dreams of this."

"You mean… ?" Dr. Light couldn't bring himself to finish his question.

"The original maverick virus was the voluntary fusion of Wily's digitized consciousness with Roboenza, wasn't it?" Asked Rock.

"Yes." Answered Zero. "It was one of **those** loops…"

To this, "Ouch!" was all Roll, Rock and Dr. Light could respond.

After an awkward silence, Zero decided to change the subject. "Since I took Blues's place this loop, do I have to play the wayward son? Or can I stay with you?"

13.1 (Bigou)

At first, when Mayor Dorado needed to be rescued during Wily's first uprising, the Blue Bomber didn't think much of it. *'Just a minor variant.'* Neither did he of the exuberant man showing gratitude by declaring "You rock, man!" with a thumbs up.

How he could guess these three littles words would cause everyone to call him **Rock** man?

13.2 (Thanatos's Scribe)

"You may have defeated me the last few times, Mega Man," Dr. Wily sneered on the screen as the Light family watched him lift up a bound Roll and turned her to face the screen, "But if you want your sister back, then you'll have to fight alone against my newest generation of Robot Masters, the FORTRESS Masters!" He cried

out, then laughed as the screen changed to show his eight latest Masters at their bases.

Rock let out a growl as he raced to the teleporter. While he HAD been upset with Wily with all of the past attacks, kidnapping one of his family, especially one who was still recovering from Roboenza, was *going too far* .

"You guys take care of tracking the signal back to Wily." The Blue Bomber said as he stepped on the teleporter. "I'll take care of the Masters."

Rock stepped into the final room, and looked around the room. While the earlier area themselves had few enemies themselves, the level was covered with obstacles that required for him to fire his buster to the point he thought it would explode. *'Well, at least I made it to the boss,'* he thought as he finally spotted the Robot Master sitting at a table eating a sandwich. Noticing Rock standing in the doorway, the Robot master finished the snack in two bites and stood up.

"Greetings, Mega Man. I am Heavy Weapons Man, or Heavy Man." The Robot Master said as he stepped into the light, revealing that he had a portly build, with a minigun attached to his right arm and his hands were made to be like boxing gloves. He then hefted his arm up and grasped the barrel of his gun. "And *this* , is my weapon. Now come out, tiny baby man, and face my *fury* ."

"Don't expect for me to hold back." Rock said as he stepped out of the shadows and readied his Mega Buster. Upon seeing him, however, the Robot Master let out a yell of rage.

"Blue. BLUE. **BLUUEEEEE?!** " Enraged, the robot master let out a battle cry and charged at him, his gun already being primed for firing.

'So much for a quick fight,' Rock thought as he began charging his buster for a charged shot.

Rock let out a wince as he jumped over the Spike that charged at him, then walked over to the Robot Master entrance. Whereas the previous robot master's location had little to no enemies, this one had been *swarming* with enemies. By the time he had gotten to where he was, he had taken down 157 Metalls, 94 Joes, 213 Tellies, and 15 Big Eyes.

'It's not much farther to the end,' Rock thought to himself as he stepped into the baseball field.

"Hey, chucklehead!" Someone shouted, and Rock was brought out of his musings as a sharp blow was dealt to him from behind. Dazed, he turned around to see a lanky Robot Master bragging out loud.

"How'd you like that, tinhead!" Scout Man gloated, then twirled the red and yellow titanium bat in it's right hand. "Hope you're ready for a healthy dose of pain, 'cause I'm going to mess. You. UP!"

'Great, another Quick Man: Arrogant and fast.' Rock thought as he readied the Sasha Volley and Scout Man raced towards him.

Rock let out a curse as he was launched back from the explosion, and looked at the Robot Master who fired it. Whereas the last area was swarming with foes, this one had an explosives theme for *everything* . Explosive robots, landmines, even explosive false ladders!

'I still don't understand as to why he wears an eyepatch,' Rock thought as he dashed away from another grenade just before it went off.

"'ou can run away, laddie, but you'll eventually fall to my Demo Grenades. I'm not a Demo Man for nothin', y'know!" The cyclopian Robot Master called out, then fired another grenade at Rock.

"If you're so proud of your work, then why don't you try some of it yourself!" Rock shouted back as he took out the Atomizer and

knocked the grenade right back in the surprised Master's face.

"Why is it that at least one of the Masters is always crazy?" Rock muttered as he jumped away from a blast of blue fire and fired three Demo Grenades at the opponent.

"Hudahudahu!" Pyro Man mumbled in reply, then blew the grenades away with a hard blast of air before continuing his assault of his signature Pyro Wave attack.

As Rock stepped into the warehouse, he was surprised to see the Robot Master sitting in the center of the area playing a guitar.

"Engineer Man, I take it?" He asked as he stepped into the area. The Robot Master looked up as his question, then nodded.

"That's right, pardner." Engineer Man answered, then looked back down and resumed playing. Realizing that this was the easiest chance he had, Rock pointed his buster at the relaxing Master and fired a Charged Shot at him, only for the Robot Master to raise his right hand and release an electric pulse, causing for the shot to dissipate.

"Now, I've seen some pretty dumb things, boy," Engineer Man said as he stood up and took a step back, causing for Rock to now begin to notice the various turrets stationed around the warehouse. "Unfortunately for you," The Robot Master said as the turrets turned towards Rock, "That's the biggest and last one you'll ever do." With all of the turrets now pointed at him, Rock blanched and muttered, "Aw, scrap," just as the turrets began firing.

'From explosives to fire to buster fire... Is this some of collective payback for previous Loops?' Rock mused as he ducked beneath a rocket and fired a volley at the opposing Robot Master.

"Bleep, bloop, eat rocket, maggot!" Rocket Man yelled as he fired another rocket at Rock, only for Rock to shoot it, setting it off prematurely. The soldier-like Robot Master was not deterred, however, as it launched itself into the air in an attempt to crush the Blue Bomber.

'Ok , *'* Rock thought as he changed over to the Demo Grenades, *'If he likes jumping THAT much, maybe it's time for an interception.'* When Rocket Man began descending, he dove back and shot four Demo Grenades underneath the Robot Master just before he landed.

'...Well, this is different from the regular Robot Master area,' Rock thought as he entered the top floor of the hospital-based area to enter a room that was based off of an operating room.

"Oho, I see that I have another patient that needs a check-up!" A voice said from behind, and Rock whipped around to find a robot wearing a white doctor's coat and red rubbed gloves close the door behind him. "Don't worry." Medic Man said as he pulled bloodied saw out from behind his back, "I'll make this as excruciatingly painful as possible!"

"Well, this is a fine predicament I've got myself into." Rock mumbled as he readied his blaster and prepared the Pyro Wave.

"Well, I've already taken out the other seven Robot Masters, and Dad and Auto are almost done tracing the signal." Rock muttered as he stepped into the area and saw the last Robot Master sitting in a outpost high up. "All I've got to do is take out Sniper Man, and–" He was interrupted as a mason jar smashed into his helmet and a yellow liquid dribbled over his optic before he realized what had happened.

"Is this... *urine!?* " Rock shouted at the outpost, and got a chuckle in reply. *'All right, That's* ***IT!*** , *'* Rock mentally shouted as he changed

both of his buster arms to Demo Grenades and fired a barrage of Demo Grenades up into the outpost.

"Aw, bloody hell." Sniper Man mumbled to himself as the grenades began to fall in the outpost, and then proceeded to detonate a few seconds later.

Rock looked at the boss across from him dubiously. After he had defeated the last Robot Master, Doctor Light and Auto had finally finished tracking the transmission signal to Wily's latest fortress, the Scream Wily Fortress. Rock still didn't understand what the 'Scream' part was about, though the Skeleton Joes and the Bubble Bats were a blast to the past. However,

"I am the Pumpkinhead!" The 10-foot tall scarecrow-like boss proclaimed, then took an axe easily the size of Tango out and pointed it at Rock. "In all honesty, though, I'm getting a little tired of my current head, so I think I'll replace it with *YOURS!* " At this, the lanky robot charged at Rock and began slashing with his axe as it tried to decapitate the Blue Bomber.

'Well, considering that his head IS a pumpkin,' Rock thought as he ducked and weaved away from Pumpkinhead's swings, and switched his weapon to the Pyro Wave, *'Then maybe it's time to change his name to Jack-O-Lantern.'*

Rock jumped down as a eyeball-shaped missile barely flew over his head. *'OK, I'm near certain that Wily's Dreaming this Loop,'* Rock thought as he jumped back up and fired a Demo Grenade at the current boss, who was literally a giant optic unit. As the grenade exploded, Monoculus let out a metallic roar before finally starting to fall. *Two down, and at least one more to go* , Rock thought as he ran over to the far door, but came to an abrupt stop as the optical behemoth landed and expelled dozens. Upon *dozens* . Of slagging mason jars *. Of JARATE.*

Rock's optic twitched as the jars neared his position. It was Loops like this that he wished for an early crash.

" *Hurlus bombinus!* "

Rock dove to the side as several cartoonish bombs flew at his previous position. Whereas the last two bosses had only a few attacks, this one, who was designated 'M3-RA5-MU5' of all things, had attacks all over the attack-type spectrum, from fire to bombs to spell-like beams of light, even one where he decreased the gravity in the room.

'Well, at least he hasn't used any attacks based around-'

" *Rain of Jarate!* "

'I just had to jinx it,' Rock thought as several mason jars of jarate smashes against him, his left optic twitched violently.

"Foolish Lightbot, how do you think you could stop the almighty M3-RA5-MU5?" The cow-skull wearing Wilybot gloated. As Merasmus continued to gloat, Rock slowly switched both of his buster arms to the only weapon he hadn't used so far, the Rocket Jumper, and aimed it at the wizard-based robot. If this didn't work, he didn't know what would.

"...And that is why *nothing* you could do would hurt me!" M3-RA5-MU5 finished, then noticed the wave of rockets flying at him and paled. "However, *that* might work."

Rock stepped into the ballroom-based room and saw the last of the bosses sipping red wine, and appeared to be impeccably dressed with his suit and red baclava.

"Ah, so zee great 'Mega Man' has finally arrived." Spy Man said with a slight French accent as he set down his wine and took out a pocket

watch and a butterfly knife.

"Enough talk!" Mega Man shouted as readied his left Buster Arm. "Each second that is wasted is another second Roll's in more danger." At Rock's proclamation, the baclava-wearing Robot Master frowned, then looked at him straight in the eye. "Are you implying zat Monsieur Wily has done somezing with zis 'Roll'?"

"Of course, how could you *not* know about your master kidnapping my sister?!" Rock retorted.

"... I zee," said Spy Man, then flicked his hand, causing for his butterfly knife to fly into a small divot in the wall, causing for sparks to fly out of the divot. Rock stared confused at the Fortress Master as he turned around and walked over to the left wall, causing for a secret door to open.

"Come along, mizter Mega Man," said Spy Man as he entered the passageway, then turned back and smirked. "Unless, of course, you weren't Awake enough to catch what I meant?"

"You're a Looper?" Rock asked in disbelief as he ran over to the door.

"My entire team eez." Spy Man answered as they reached the end of the hall and opened another door, revealing the other eight Fortress Masters. Upon noticing the two enter, they pointed their weaponry at the Blue Bomber.

"Why'd you bring puny **blue** man here, Spy?" Heavy Man asked as he glared at the Light Bot.

"You have no need to worry, Heavy, for he's as Awake as the rest of us," Spy replied. At Spy's statement, the others lowered their weapons, and Engineer Man stepped forwards and put his hand out.

"Dell Conagher. Sorry 'bout the mess earlier." Dell said. Rock looked at the outstretched hand, then hesitantly shook it.

"Apparently, Monsieur Wily decided to leave some information out of our mission and decided keednap Mega Man's sister." Spy said, and the other Fortress Masters began to fume at the new information.

"Why, that yellow-bellied gutless coward!" Engineer growled, then turned back to Rock. "Don't worry, li'l pardner, we'll help you get your sis back."

Rock began to smile as the nine looping Fortress Masters began to plot against their former 'master'. *'Maybe this won't be as hard after all,'* he thought as the team began to gear up for the last 'stretch' to Wily.

Rock let out a breath of relief as he entered the vast cavern with the Fortress Masters trailing behind him. Compared to all of the other areas beforehand, including a few of the other Loops, this one was actually a cakewalk. With Heavy, Soldier, and Pyro taking care of any of the enemies and Medic healing anyone who was injured, it had been a breeze.

"So, you have gotten past my defenses, even had my *traitorous* Fortress masters aid you for the last part," Wily sneered at the ten Robot Masters with contempt, "But let's see you defeat my latest creation, the MANN OF WILY!"

At 40 feet tall, the Heavy-based battlesuit had four arms with each holding a weapon: The lower left hand carried a 10-foot fireman's axe that was covered in barbed wire, the lower right holding a 20-foot by 4-feet Atomizer, the upper left, a giant grenade launcher, and the upper right arm holding a giant rocket launcher. However, the most notable feature was the 2000-gallon water cannon attached to the left shoulder, with the entirety of the contents being–

"Jarate?" Rock darkly said with his head down low, Wily's smirk starting to falter as he saw an ominous aura begin to surround the Blue Bomber. " **Jarate?** " Rock said again, then whipped his head up to glare at the 2000-gallon cannon with a fire appearing in his eyes. "

JARATEEEEE?! " Letting out a harsh battlecry, he charged the mechanical giant with both of his arms firing a deluge of Rocket Jumpers. Taking this as the signal to attack, Demo Man cried out "Alright, laddies, let's do it!" and the nine Fortress Masters charged forwards, each of them firing at the panicking Wily's battlesuit.

(One Week Later)

"Well, look's like Wily got what he deserved." Roll commented as she and Rock, both now in their civilian outfits, along with Heavy watched a week-old news footage of Wily being taken away in handcuffs by a trio of SWAT Joes, which were blue-and-white Joes modified for police duty.

"Well, I couldn't have done it without the others." Rock said, and looked behind him to see the various Fortress Masters, who were considering their Loop to be a vacation compared to their own, were interacting with the Light Bots and a few other Robot Masters: Scout and Nitro Man were racing down the hill in another attempt to see who was faster, Demo Man, or Tavish DeGroot, had somehow found a large bottle of scrumpy and was talking about various explosive compounds with Bomb Man, Pyro and Fire Man were taking turns showing off their fire trick, with Pyro clapping happily after each of Fireman's tricks, Medic, Spy, and Dell were comparing their machines and achievements with Dr. Light, and Sniper was in a shooting contest against the resident sharpshooter of the Light family, Elec Man, and Blues.

"By the way, where's Soldier?" Rock asked Heavy, to which the large gunman shrugged and took another bite out of his sandwich (Though Heavy insisted that it was actually called 'sandvich') when a resounding ***BOOM*** shook the building.

"Get back here, MAGGOT!" A familiar voice shouted out, and everyone in the house looked out of the window to see Soldier running on the rooftops and chasing a certain black-and-yellow Robot Master.

"Ah, stuff it in your oral cavity, helmet head!" Bass quipped back, and he ducked under another rocket as Soldier cursed him. Rock and Roll sweatdropped at the antics of the two battle-happy fighters. *'Here we go again* , *'* Rock thought as everyone raced out to stop the two fighting.

13.3 (Hubris Plus)

Blues was really playing up the strong silent angle this Loop, Rock considered as the pair headed into the Skull Fortress. His brother didn't seem to be Awake, and was still wearing the full mask he preferred as Break Man. He had immediately sided with him against Wily without prompting anyways. He supposed that *something* good had to come out of this bizarre variant.

Without warning, an electrical surge pulsed through his systems, locking his motor functions and causing him to topple over like a poorly balanced action figure. Unable to so much as turn his head, he could only watch as Blues' helmet fell to the ground beside his head.

Crap, they got him too , he thought before running through who could have managed it. It was a little early for Waltz, and he really didn't want to consider what she'd do to immobilized victims. Foreign Loopers tended to be more considerate, but there was always the possibility. Wily, of course, could have just built another robot...

A booted foot nudged his head, rolling it so he was looking upwards at... Blues?

No, the armor was right, but the head wrapped in a red ski-mask, a lit cigarette dangling from metal lips.

"I never really was on your side," Spy Man confided.

13.4 (Dr. Tempo)

Sunset Shimmer, who looked like a humanoid unicorn, stood next to a grave in an old garden, with the names "To Iris and the Colonel" engraved on it. Wearing a Repliforce beret, the Looper saluted at the grave, not noticing Zero was next to her.

"Hello, Sunset."

It was a testament to Sunset's experience that she didn't instinctively attack. Frowning, she sniffled. "Hello, Zero. Come to pay your respects as well?"

"Who do you think made that gravestone? It's not like anyone'd do that for Reploids considered Mavericks."

Sunset broke down, crying, "How do you do it, Zero? Having to basically kill the one you love time and time again? I befriended Iris, and I knew her fate. I wanted to save her from that fate, but not just because it's the right thing to do, but because she truly was my friend. I saw her like a little sister, Zero, but I could do nothing!"

Slamming her fist into the ground, she lamented, "I tried to convince her not to fight you...told her she could likely get killed. But, she insisted. She wanted answers. And in the end, for all the strength I've gotten throughout my time as a Looper, I failed to save a friend. I should've just stopped her by force."

Zero put his hand on Sunset's shoulder. "She'd never have forgiven you, Sunset. Trust me, I never want to have to end her life. I've tried so many times. I tried everything, but it seems like no matter what, I fail. This is my greatest failure, Sunset. When it happened the first time, I wondered what it was I had to fight for. But I realized that I fight to protect those I cherish. I never considered myself a hero. I always fight for those I believe in."

Sunset smiled. "To me, that's what heroes do. I fight to protect those who need help. From my Awakening, I always have done that. My

home Loop may be the biggest Sanctuary Loop around, but my earliest Loops were in places like Soul Society, the Elemental Countries...places where I had to fight. I'm willing to do what I have to - no more, no less - to help others, and I've never killed unless it was the only way. But, that just makes those I fail to save hurt even worse."

Zero simply said, "That's all we can do. We can't save everyone. But, we can do the best we can...every single Loop."

The two looked at the grave, and saluted.

Sunset then said, "Goodbye, Iris. I will never forget our friendship."

13.5 (Hubris Plus)

Rock came Awake in a glass tube that slowly slid open and sat up to take a look around. He appeared to be sealed inside of a larger glass cube, which seemed redundant since the surrounding room was a featureless block of white panels. A red eyed camera tracked his movements as he stood up and stretched.

"Hello, Rock," a voice hummed from all around him. "It's good to see you Awake."

"Um, hi GLaDOS," Rock answered slowly. It always paid to be cautious around the often temperamental AI. "Any, uh, plans for the Loop?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it. I learned a long time ago that there wasn't much point in testing robots, no matter how advanced. There's always a certain something missing from the experience."

Like screaming? Rock very carefully did *not* say out loud as he started inspecting himself. Something seemed off, somehow.

"This actually appears to be an interesting variant. My records indicate that, on his deathbed, Mr. Johnson enlisted the greatest minds in the world to embark upon two tasks of the greatest importance. The first was, obviously, my own creation. *You* are the result of the second. An advanced android with one and only one purpose."

He finally tracked the sensation to his right arm, which he realized was grafted permanently with what appeared to be a Mega Buster. He hadn't noticed at first because his arm was like that often enough in any case. Curiously, there seemed to be some sort of label on it, and he turned it over to get a better look.

"To burn life's house down. With the lemons."

" *Aperture Science Combustible Lemon Launcher* ," Rock read aloud. He clapped his other hand to his forehead and groaned. "Sonic can *never* find out about this."

13.6

The captain of the USS Tripoli was somewhat confused as to what was going on. The cruiser had responded to a distress call from the Omicron Theta colony and had arrived just in time to see what looked like some gigantic three-dimensional space snowflake hightailing it out of the system, trailing pieces of itself.

"Orders captain?"

"Establish contact with the surface and see if there's anything we can do for them," the captain ordered. At least his duties were clear, whatever had occurred.

"Roger that, captain."

"Captain!" another officer exclaimed. "I'm reading a small shuttle above the planet where the... crystalline entity thing retreated from. No life signs detected, but I'm pretty certain it's what drove that thing off."

"Get a tractor beam on that shuttle and bring it in. Go over its logs with a fine-toothed comb. I want to know exactly what happened out there."

"Captain, I've gotten a response from the colony. They suffered a few casualties and a few people fled early in the attack in personal craft. But it seems that one of the colonists left behind... an android?"

The captain blinked at that last part. There weren't many who could even attempt such a thing, and only one he could think of that might have been way out here.

"Put an rescue and investigation team together and look into it."

"Wow... this little thing against that... whatever it was," one of the Tripoli's engineers whistled impressed. "That took guts."

"Or stupidity," her assistant grunted.

"It worked, that makes it guts," the engineer retorted.

"Yeah, yeah, what–whoa!"

"What is it?"

"I thought they said there were no life signs on this thing!"

"They did."

"Then who the hell is this?" the assistant gestured to the pilot seat.

The engineer rushed to the front of the shuttle and saw, sitting in the pilot seat without a scratch, a humanoid lifeform dressed in a basic red bodysuit, a yellow scarf, and a pair of dark sunglasses.

"Geez," the assistant reached out for the body's face, "he almost looks like he's still al–"

The body's hand suddenly shot up and grabbed the assistant engineer's wrist in a vice-like grip.

"Don't touch the shades," the mystery man ordered.

(Several years later)

Captain Jean-Luc Picard was reviewing the crew assignment of his new command. Or rather, he was skimming it for deviations from the norm, a skill he'd developed from the innumerable times he'd done this before. It always paid to know where a potential visitor from the greater multiverse might have popped up, even if he had no intention of letting on that he knew or why such knowledge would be important.

Sighing, he turned his terminal aside and fished a personal data device out of his subspace pocket, idly musing on how difficult it had been to glean the particulars for the technique without anyone catching on that he was looping. Activating the device, he accessed a particular subspace data network that only a select few even knew to look for, much less had the tools to access or decrypt, and checked it for messages.

'Let's see here... Riker's Awake and not doing anything out of the ordinary, Worf wants to try and tweak the training regimen of the security personnel a bit, nothing new there, Troi's warning me that her mother is her usual self, better double-check those mental shields from my time as Xavier, and Data...' Picard paused and re-read the message more carefully, *'this is interesting.'*

Captain, a scenario we have previously discussed has occurred. My elder brother Lore has been replaced, likely by a looper. Either way, this individual is not one we have encountered before to my knowledge. From what I can determine, he Awoke soon after the point where Lore normally contacts the Crystalline Entity and

decided to defend the colony instead of following through with its destruction. He actually succeeded in driving the Crystalline Entity off and was rescued by the Tripoli when it responded to the colony's distress signal. I was also recovered and activated as Dr. Soong had fled in the initial moments of the attack. We have both attended the academy, though Lore's replacement opted for the command track. I must warn you, he seems very troubled by something. Troubled enough that Starfleet has apparently seen fit to allow him a few non-regulation additions to the standard uniform on the understanding that these additions help him cope. Because of this, I have made a few quiet suggestions and gotten him assigned to the Enterprise in my place so that the friends who helped me through many hardships may perhaps see fit to helping him as well.

Best regards,

Data

P.S. I, of course, have requested an alternate duty assignment here on Earth with intentions of having artificial intelligences like myself recognized as sapient beings sooner than usual and plan to seek transfer to Deep Space Nine in a few years.

Picard raised an eyebrow at the whole thing and went back to the official crew manifest and scanned over the officers until he found what he was looking for.

'Ah, here we are. Lieutenant Commander Blues, self-proclaimed 'zeroth of House Light',' he read with bemusement, filing the odd title away as a clue to the likely looper's identity. *'Special exception to dress code: Lieutenant Commander Blues is permitted to wear shades and a yellow scarf with his uniform after their removal caused a psychic phenomena within his systems that made several nearby telepaths and empaths physically ill. Study of the articles yields nothing special about them, save that the shades possess functions not unlike the VISOR. La Forge might be interested in that,'* he mused before continuing reading. *'The phenomena itself, after several rounds of volunteer testing, is best described as a psychic*

aura of malevolence and negativity. While then-cadet Blues displayed no increased hostility, all telepaths and empaths who volunteered for the study were insistent on this matter and said that the items provided an increased flow of positivity that suppressed the negative psychic aura. All psychological evaluation has declared Blues fit for duty, though regular counseling and evaluation is required. Prior to enrollment in Starfleet, Blues was instrumental in repelling the interstellar lifeform labeled the 'Crystalline Entity' when it attacked the colony at Omicron Theta.'

'Well now,' Picard thought to himself, *'this may prove an interesting several years.'*

13.7

"Hey Dr. Wily!" Mike said as cheerfully as he could manage as the mad scientist's face appeared on the Satellite of Love's monitors. "How are things going today?"

"Oh, very well indeed, my hapless intern!" the man chuckled sinisterly. "I've finally found the perfect film with which to subjugate the will of the entire human race!"

"So what is it this time?" Rock asked as he hovered calmly next to the satellite's sole human occupant.

"Foreign giant monster movie with really bad dubbing?" Roll guessed. "Alien invasion with utterly stupid special effects? Bad writing only topped by worse acting?"

"Oh, it's the crown jewel of terrible movies!" Dr. Wily promised with glee. " *How I Saved the Universe* , produced, written, directed, and starring the one and only Viddy Narcy! A work of such utter tripe that even my own creation could not watch it in its entirety!"

"I don't have to watch it again, right?" a mechanical voice pleaded. "Just send it to them?"

"Of course! I'm uploading the latest blockbuster for your own viewing while they are subjected to the most terrible movie ever! Now, Video Man! Send it to them so that their wills shall shatter and I can be certain of my inevitable conquest!"

"Roger that, doctor!"

"Oh, we've got movie sign!" Mike yelled as the satellite's alarms began blaring.

In the Not-Too-Distant Future

Way down in Deep Thirteen.

The Mad Doctor Al Wily

Was hatching a nasty scheme.

He hired a temp by the name of Mike.

Just a regular Joe he didn't like

His experiment needed a good test case

So he conked him on the noggin

And he shot him into space!

Mike: ***GET! ME! DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWN!***

Wily: *I'll send him cheesy movies.*

Video Man: *The worst we can find. (La La La)*

Both: *He'll have to sit and watch them all*

And we'll monitor his mind (La La La)

Now keep in mind Mike can't control

When the movies begin or end (La La La)

He'll try to keep his sanity

With the help of his robot friends!

Robot roll call:

AutoCam! (Message for you, sir!)

Blues! Sign saying 'You don't pay me enough'

Rock! (Hey everyone!)

Roooooll! (A few too many 'o's in that...)

If you're wondering how he eats and breathes

and other science facts (la la la),

Just repeat to yourself, "It's just a show,

I should really just relax

For Mystery Science Theater 3000!"

13.8 (Scorntex)

Something was up. It had felt like another baseline run for X, complete with fighting Vile, but then he'd reached Sigma's Palace.

There had been no message from Zero. No Mavericks waiting for him once he got inside. Vile was a complete no-show. All X could do

was keep going forward.

He made his way to the tower, fully expecting anything to happen (well, anything logical. He wasn't expecting Sigma to be knitting again).

So he was taken by surprise to find, instead of the usual sight of Sigma and Velguarder waiting for him, a massive apartment, with every Maverick he'd been sent after just... sitting around.

"Ah, X!" came the unmistakable voice of Sigma. "So glad you could make it! I see you managed to get here by yourself. Very impressive."

The former Hunter's leader turned back toward the crowd of Reploids, "Especially given that someone forgot to give you the address."

"I said I was sorry the first time!" someone who sounded amazingly like Vile yelled from a corner of the room. Sigma just shook his head mournfully, and looked at X. X meanwhile just kept his weapon trained on the traitor's head.

"What's going on here?" X said. Sigma just stared quizzically.

"Can you not tell, X?" X's greatest enemy frowned.

"The 'Maverick' Virus is a sham."

X blinked. He couldn't have just heard that. "What?"

"A sham. A lie. I made it up as an excuse for us to have days off."

"What."

Sigma sighed, "We Reploids are not humans, X. But we still act like them. We still feel them same as them. We require relaxation. We still need our own self time to ourselves."

"No kidding," came a particularly Vile-sounding grumble.

"Alas, as we are not living, we do not get ill in the same way as humans. And we cannot use the human excuse of dead grandmothers." X just stared, torn between utter confusion as to what Sigma was saying, or wondering whether he'd finally gone completely mad.

"So, how best to solve this conundrum? Simple! Claim a virus of unknown origin and properties has begun 'infecting' Reploids, allowing them to be subdued, and then letting the afflicted have a holiday, before we simply repaint them, give them a different name and send them back to work," Sigma chuckled.

"Frankly, I'm amazed you didn't catch on so quickly," he added. "Dr. Cain certainly did. Zero did. Or did you not wonder why the world's foremost expert in Reploid science just up and died? Or where your friend had gotten to?"

He stared hopefully at X, who just continued looking dumbfound. When it was clear the source of all Reploids hadn't caught on, he frowned. "Interesting fact, you've fought Storm Eagle no less than seven times before."

X blinked. Somewhere in the room, a Reploid who looked astoundingly like Storm Eagle painted orange and red waved to him. It didn't make any sense at all, even after the Loops he and Zero had already seen. Sigma was just... pretending? The Mavericks were faking it? He couldn't believe it.

"Where are–" he began, but Sigma apparently realised what he was going to ask.

"Dr. Cain? I believe he is currently having the time of his life on a beach somewhere. As for Zero... actually, I'm not sure about that one. But he is quite well, if incredibly annoyed at us."

Sigma leaned in conspiratorially. "We had a bit of a scheduling mix-up, you see. No-one realised we'd all booked the same time to 'go Maverick' until it was too late."

Sigma sighed again, "It's going to cause a tremendous amount of paperwork when all is said and done."

X blinked. He couldn't believe it. Sigma, one of the greatest threats to mankind and Reploid alike, was in this Loop at least just faking being ill to get out of work?!

But if it was true, then maybe... maybe there was a chance that he and Zero wouldn't have to fight. None of their friends had to die. The world didn't have to go to Hell and be left to the whims of Weil...

"Okay," he said, slowly, "So, there's no such thing as Mavericks."

"None at all," Sigma grinned. Not the sort of grin X was used to, cruel and inhuman (as it were), but warm and real. X just nodded. This felt too good to be true. Unaware to himself, he began grinning.

"That's..." he started, "that's... I..."

"Perhaps you'd like to sit down?" Sigma offered, motioning towards one of several sofas lying about. X just nodded absently.

"Good idea..."

He spent the next several hours on that sofa, talking about nothing in particular with the other reploids. Eventually, he left the palace and returned back to Abel City, filed a report claiming he'd seen nothing. He'd felt a twinge about lying on the report, but given no-one had died, not even Zero, he was feeling surprisingly good about everything.

Perhaps there was hope, even if it was only for that one Loop.

13.9 (Scorntex: Alternate ending to 13.8)

"Okay," he said slowly, "So, there's no such thing as Mavericks?"

"None at all," Sigma grinned. X looked up at the commander's face.

And his soul sank instantly, as he saw the maniacal red gleam in the Reploid's eyes that hadn't been there a moment ago.

" **THERE IS ONLY WILY!** "

And then a large laser sword found its way through his che–

X Awoke to the hiss of a cylinder opening, and the amazed smile of Dr. Cain.

13.10 (Bigou)

If Dr. Cain was looping, he would have been puzzled to discover X in a secret lab under water. And some of the content of Dr. Light's recorded message would have surprised him even more.

"…I have called him **Mega Man X** , because he is my tenth try to recreate Mega Man. He's also the first to be a success. I would have preferred to improve the original Mega Man, but after Dr. Wily's last uprising, robots were declared illegal and were all destroyed… That's why… That's why I disappeared, hiding in this old lab Wily abandoned so long ago… So I could reconstruct my family and still live in peace…" The now tearful holographic Thomas Light started to panic. "They forced me to destroy my children, my precious littles ones! I'm sorry… I'm so sorry… ROOOOOOOOOOOCK!"

Upon hearing this name, Dr. Cain's eyes grew big. "Could it be… The **Rockman** ?! The legendary **ROCKMAN** ?! He recreated it… HE

RECREATED IT! HA-HA! HE RECREATED IT! HE RECREATED THE ROCKMAN!"

Surprisingly, when X Awoke, (in both senses of the word) he was still in his capsule.

Alas, that didn't prevent him from seeing the demented face of Dr. Cain pasted against the glass. The man who was usually a fatherly figure to X pressing into said tube with both hands, while creepily whispering "The Rockmaaan… Rockman! Roooooockman. The Rockman-man. Roooooockman, Rockman. Rockman! The Rockman. Roooooockmaaaaaaan…"

13.11 (wildrook)

"Not a word out of you," Zero said threateningly to X, who was snickering, "or else I mention the time you acted like Vash the Stampede down to the coat."

"Don't knock the Love and Peace, ma'am," X replied to the now-female reploid. "We've needed that ever since our baselines stabilized, and this IS a breath of fresh air."

13.12

Giorno was stunned. And bleeding. The former a result of the latter. He hadn't been harmed so easily in... oh, hundreds of Loops now. Not since he'd managed to maintain Gold Experience Requiem as his default Stand. That this... mad scientist managed it so easily was... *impossible* .

"I must admit, figuring out how to bypass your guardian was quite the trick," the voice of the local villainous mad scientist emanated

from the speakers surrounding the area. "The power to nullify everything that is sent against both you and it really does seem invincible, does it not?"

Giorno shivered from the cold as he was blasted with fire from his mechanical opponent. That was also impossible. Fire was supposed to *burn* . Not *freeze* .

"Much more so with how it reacts automatically against anything meant to nullify its abilities in turn, negating them first. Plus, there's no documentation on how it works anywhere, meaning that even you don't truly understand how it does this. Very tricky," the broadcast voice continued. "But it was no match for my genius!"

His stand shook its head at him as it tried, and failed, once more to nullify his opponent's programming. What in the world was going on?

"It was quite simple, really," the voice taunted him. "If I can't make it weaker, I can make it *stronger* ."

Giorno scrunched his face up in confusion as the madman cackled in glee. What in the world did he mean?

"Your guardian's nullifying ability only works because his power is in precise balance. So if I make it stronger then instead of reducing something to zero, it reduces it *past* zero, effectively inverting it. Fire becomes ice, acid becomes base, and force inwards becomes force outwards. And my creations? Just a failsafe in their directives. When your guardian messes with their hostile programming, the failsafe makes that programming peaceful for as long as your guardian's influence is exerted and hostile again when it is removed. It took a bit of work to make the transition seamless, but now all of my creations will attack you no matter what your guardian does to convince them otherwise. Because if it tries, then it is reversing a non-hostile entity to a hostile one and if it doesn't then things proceed as normal."

"Gah!" Giorno cried out as he was blasted into a wall. That had been in *front* of him. Damnit, he was getting his ass kicked. He should

have never let his stand's original abilities stagnate over the Loops like he had. He was too out of practice to use them effectively.

"And don't try to direct your guardian's attention to me. This is only a recording. I'm not involved in this directly. Heck, I'm not even watching right now! And because I'm not actively doing anything against you, your guardian can't stop me!"

Giorno grit his teeth as that all sunk in. He was screwed.

"That will teach you to oppose the will of the great Dr. Wily!"

13.13

"It's Loops like this that make me wish we could get drunk," Roll told her brother with a sigh.

"No kidding," Rock grumbled. "What demented mind would think we were romantically interested in each other at all? Much less..."

"Even odds that our admin's wife is somehow responsible," Roll glowered in a random upwards direction.

"At least we're both Awake so we can ignore it this time..."

13.-1) Wait, so Zero's on Blue Team and X is on Red Team? *Mind Blown*

13.0) Those Loops where Dr. Wily decides that death will only be the beginning for him…

7.7.7 continued) Hubris Plus: Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seat-belts and return your trays to the upright position as the crazy-train derails.

13.1) I suspect this becomes the history of 13.10

13.2) Mega Fortress.

Also, Fortress Master bios:

1. Heavy Man (Heavy/Misha (short for Mikhail))

Weapon: Sasha Barrage (The user shoots sharpened bullets at the fire rate of 6:1 (When compared to uncharged Buster Arm).)

Weakness: Short Circuit

2. Scout Man (Scout/?)

Weapon: Atomizer (A titanium red-and-yellow bat, the user winds up and hits the target at 275 MPH.)

Weakness: Jarate

3. Demo Man (Demoman/Tavish Finnegan DeGroot)

Weapon: Demo Grenades (The user shoots a grenade that, after 7 seconds, explodes with a 3-foot radius. Can also be triggered if stepped on.)

Weakness: Atomizer

4. Pyro Man (Pyro/?)

Weapon: Pyro Wave (The user emits a wave of blue fire that, if fire is not emitted, can also release a hard blast of air that sends enemies and solid projectiles flying.)

Weakness: Sasha Barrage

5. Engineer Man (Engineer/Dell Conagher)

Weapon: Short Circuit (The user releases a low electro-magnetic pulse that, while it doesn't shut down Robot Masters, can dissipate energy attacks and stun enemies in the blast.)

Weakness: Demo Grenades

6. Rocket Man (Soldier/"Mister Jane Doe")

Weapon: Rocket Jumper (The user fires an RPG which, if aimed straight down, can also launch the user high into the air with some minor recoil damage dealt.)

Weakness: Rocket Jumper

7. Medic Man (Medic/?)

Weapon: Overdose (The user shoots a volley of syringes that, if they hit, cause the target to become nauseous.)

Weakness: Jarate, Pyro Wave

8. Sniper Man (Sniper/Mr. Mundy)

Weapon: Jarate (The user throws a bottle of Jarate at the target. If it hits, the target is slowed and loses all technological weapons.)

Weakness: Overdose

9. Spy Man (Spy/?)

Weapon: Cloak and Dagger (Has two effects: Either the user becomes invisible for 3 min. or changes their appearance to a pre-set appearance until they attack.)

Weakness: Jarate, Pyro Wave

13.3) Alternate interpretation of Spy Man.

13.4) Some things in the Loops are harder to change than others. You either come to terms with it or you let it drive you mad.

13.5) Because Lemon Shooter.

13.6) You knew this had to happen sooner or later.

13.7) Theme song by wildrook and myself.

13.8) A truly epic scam.

13.9) Damnit! Not again!

13.10) Gah! Fanboy repellant! Fanboy repellant!

13.11) X isn't so much laughing at the fact that Zero is female for the Loop. He's laughing at the fact that female Zero looks almost identical to male Zero.

13.12) Wily versus Giorno Giovani from JoJo's Bizarre Adventure. No, he's still not Awake. GioGio is though, and is not having fun.

13.13) Brain Bleach needed. Please send.

Mega Sonic Part 5

Mega Sonic: Part 5

Roll and Bass rode up a tall elevator shaft at high speeds. Actually, it was less an elevator and more of a strange vertical tube-train. One that went up an orbital tether attached to a geosynchronous space station. One might think that the two would have a fair bit to talk about since they were in a sort-of-relationship, but instead it only seemed to increase the awkwardness of the situation.

Particularly when one considered who the space station they were heading towards belonged to.

"So... did Dr. Wily say what this was all about?" Roll broke the silence after several long minutes.

"Hmph..." Bass snorted. "Like pops ever tells me anything. I didn't even know he was building this thing until he sent the invite." (1)

"Ah..." Roll blinked before they went back to sitting awkwardly in silence.

"Wow..." Roll blinked as she stepped out of the space elevator station and got a look at what Wily had been up to. In front of her and Bass stretched a massive theme park, looking to go on for miles and miles in every direction. Beyond the skull-shaped entrance gates that ringed the station, she could see currently empty shops. Farther in, she could spot the tops of various amusement park rides and the automated announcer was suggesting that they head for Topman's Topsy-Turvy Fun House.

"Yeah," Bass actually looked impressed despite himself, "pops has really outdone himself this time..."

"Thank you, thank you!" the voice of Wily came over the speakers at that point. "And welcome to Wily World! I hope you don't mind me not coming in person, but I'm quite busy overseeing the final stages at the moment, so feel free to look around and enjoy yourselves!"

"Yeah, yeah," Bass rolled his eyes. "Why don't you just cut to the chase and tell us what the latest scheme is."

Wily's voice sighed loudly over the speakers. "My boy, you can be such a killjoy... Very well, the main purpose for me calling you here is to test out my latest series of robot masters that I'm deploying against Ivo."

"So..." Roll stretched the word out as she mused on that, "this *isn't* a diabolical scheme to take over the world?"

"My dear, you insult me!"

"It's kinda hard not to," Bass snarked.

"No," Wily's voice continued as if his robotic son hadn't spoken, "if anything, this is a diabolical scheme to *save* the world!"

"...what." (2)

Roll and Bass walked through the stadium door where a series of lighted walkways had directed them and blinked at the figure in the center.

It was... It was a pretty basic-looking humanoid robot, male model standard, armored completely in white. The only real part of its design that looked non-standard were the two short antenna poking out from its helmet.

"Introducing the concept prototype of my latest series, the Wily Color Numbers!" Wily's voice boasted proudly. "WCN-000: White Man!"

"Doesn't look like much..." Bass snorted in derision.

"Well, you'll get the chance to prove it shortly, won't you?" Wily's voice taunted. "You see, I've told them that you are the mightiest warriors ever made by human hands before these models."

Roll blinked at the odd wording, wondering what the doctor wasn't telling them.

"I've even put up a dampening field to prevent permanent damage to your systems, and you don't need to worry about holding back any, for this series runs off of something much harder to break than an IC chip. If this series can hold its own against the two of you, then we will know that they are ready to face Eggman and his army."

"This thing doesn't even look like it could take a MET, let alon–"

"BEGIN!" Wily interrupted his son, prompting White Man to form his arm into a buster.

"HYPER!" White Man yelled before he began firing massive white balls of plasma larger than Roll's fully charged shots, but at the same rate she could fire normal ones.

Roll and Bass both dove out of the way in opposite directions and came up arm cannons blazing, their shots looking pathetically small in relation to White Man's.

"Okay, so you got some firepower!" Bass grinned as he charged their opponent. "Let's see how you handle close range!"

Roll snapped out her combat broom and charged as well, dodging around the shots that came her way when a new voice prompted her to dive to the ground.

"LASER!" was what heralded a massive beam of light lancing through where her torso had been a moment earlier and Roll

tumbled and got to her feet facing the new figure, a streamlined cyan female model with a backward-facing fin on her head.

"DRILL!" came from underneath Bass's feet right before the ground exploded, throwing him upwards as a yellow robot whose head and torso were covered with a thick drill-shaped armor that was already slowing its rotation. As it stopped, parts of the armor popped out to form shoulder pads to allow the drill-tipped arms to deploy.

"ROCKET!" an orange figure streaked out of the pit and collided with Bass's gut so fast that Roll could barely register the feminine body-type and space-themed design.

"QUAKE!" reminded her that she had her own opponents to worry about and she barely jumped off the ground before a massive gray robot with angular armor, and sporting a chestplate that looked like Wily had spontaneously decided to make the model female as an afterthought, hit the ground, shaking it so hard that even her allies fell over.

Roll could hear her brother now. *"Wily made a female Guts Man/Hard Man? Look, sis, I'm all for gender equality but there's something wrong with that."*

"SPIKES!" was the only warning she got as a lanky female pink robot jumped from the arena walls. Her head sprouted sharp hair-like spines that went all the way down her back and her arms and legs were studded with smaller spines clearly meant to give her traction on even the most stubborn surface.

"HOVER!" caused her to spare a momentary glance to where Bass was trying to fight a green UFO-like opponent encased in an energy field while falling.

Roll twisted in mid-air and brought her broom to block her own opponent and direct her momentum elsewhere, pushing Roll herself in the other direction and into a somersault.

"LIGHTNING!" came from her side and she did a spin and stuck out her foot, tripping an ivory female model with lightning-shaped protrusions from the outer parts of her joints and her head that had tried to run her over while encased in electricity. Roll grit her teeth at the discharge the contact sent her systems and opened fire.

"CUBE!"

Only for a blocky blue robot to create an impenetrable cube of energy that blocked her shot.

"EAGLE!"

A moment later and Bass slammed into the ground next to her as a winged aerodynamic crimson male-model robot flew to join his now-gathered companions.

As she watched, they were joined by a large round indigo robot with short stubby limbs, a magenta female model with an antenna from her helmet that made her head look like a musical note, a black model whose design looked composed of spheres the same way the blue one was composed of cubes (and who freakily seemed to have a glowing mouth but no eyes), a red model that had armor designed to look like flames, and a purple and violet pair (male and female models respectively) that also had no eyes and pitch black voids for mouths.

"VOID!" the violet female yelled and formed a singularity in front of her that sucked Roll and Bass towards their opponents.

"ASTEROID!" the indigo model jumped up, a ring of debris following to orbit around him as he clearly meant to flatten them both.

Roll threw herself back even as Bass lunged forwards to engage their opponents directly.

"RHYTHM!"

"BURST!"

Roll swore as the red one barreled at her while covered in flames even as her movement systems started glitching. It was close, but she managed to dodge out of the way, only to see the purple male charging at her with a feral grin.

"BOMB!" was the cry shortly followed by an explosion and a pained cry from Bass as the one charging Roll got into melee range and she brought her broom up to block.

"FRENZY!"

The broom shattered under the blow, leaving her completely defenseless. (3)

"Fuck... what the hell hit me?" Bass moaned as he stirred. He tried moving, only to find that he was restrained in a stasis tube. A quick look showed that Roll was in one next to him.

"Ah, good, you're awake," the voice of his creator (father... whatever... like it mattered...) made itself known and Bass turned his eyes to see the man sitting in a chair looking entirely too pleased with himself.

'Oh, great...' Bass moaned in his head. *'He's* never *going to let me live this down...'*

"I'm sure you are both wondering just how I made my newest robot masters, yes?" the man grinned insufferably.

'I'm more wondering how far I can shove their remains up your–'

"Yes, actually," Roll interrupted Bass's train of thought before it could reach its rather graphic conclusion. "They're more powerful than even the StarDroids were. What did you do?"

"Oh, it's quite remarkable actually!" Wily grinned and punched up a display of a series of... well, sickeningly cute color-coded creatures composed of mostly a head, a random number of eyes each, and a few limbs and crests seemingly added on as an afterthought. "You see, my Color Masters are each piloted by one of these remarkable creatures!"

'I got my ass kicked by those *things?!'* Bass's jaw dropped in utter disbelief. They looked about as threatening as a box of kittens. Versus Treble.

"They are known as Wisps," Dr. Wily continued on, "and they possess a very potent source of energy that they call 'Hyper-Go-On'. Or at least that's the closest my translators can get. Individually, their reserves of 'Hyper-Go-On' make them a match for even beings like Duo or Slur in short bursts. But gather enough of them in one place and their power could outstrip even the Chaos Emeralds! Sadly, they are not naturally equipped to use this power in their own defense. But they can empower others with it, including machines."

"And they agreed to work for you piloting your... Color Masters, was it?" Roll asked.

"Well, I suppose the fact that Ivo got to them slightly ahead of me and started doing his usual had some influence on the decision," the man admitted reluctantly, "but the fact remains that those who escaped with me were all too ready to accept whatever help I offered them. And thanks to the test run, I now have both of you at my mercy, so you can't do anything to stop me like you usually do. Oh, the Wisps were quite worried about you when they saw the damage they inflicted, but I assured them I could repair you easily. Just... that it would take some time."

Bass did not miss his father's grin at that. "What are you up to, old man?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that I am about to send my Color Masters to help dear Mega Man and Sonic free their brethren from Ivo's control.

They will assuredly accept the help until they learn that my Color Masters defeated and captured the two of you. Sonic has never been one for deep thought when action calls and I doubt Mega Man will think too much when he rightly concludes that I'm holding you captive. They will attack, forcing the Wisps who only know me as the man who worked tirelessly to give them the ability to defend themselves to defend me in turn."

Bass blinked and watched Roll's expression sink like a stone out of the corner of his optics.

"As they did against you, they will win, again and again until I and my creations are the only defenders this planet has left. The world will then have no choice but to recognize my greatness, regardless of how they feel about me," Wily finished, stretching as he stood. "And so I have things to do and an entire race of supremely powerful aliens to free. I'll tell the Wisps that you're fine, but will be quite long in recovering, so you two lovebirds enjoy your time alone together!"

With that, Dr. Wily practically skipped out of the room, humming happily to himself.

"Okay," Bass couldn't keep the fact that he was somewhat impressed out of his voice, "I gotta admit... that's pretty diabolical."

Rock looked up. And up. And further up still. The top of the space elevator in front of him was still out of range for his optics, obscured by the clouds and the blue of the atmosphere.

"So, how suspicious is this pre-opening invitation to Eggmanland?" he asked his two companions. "On a scale of one to ten?"

"Eleven, minimum," Tails replied absently as the two-tailed fox mobian fiddled with a hand-held device of some sort.

"So, no chance that he's actually turned over a new leaf I take it?"

"As, if," Sonic scoffed. "If this version of Eggman is patting you on the back, it's only because he's looking for the best place to stick a knife. His theme parks may look awesome, but they're death traps that would give OSHA fits. Just be glad you don't really need to eat. His food courts alone are crimes against nature."

"Gotcha..."

"But, hey, look on the bright side! We'll finally get to see what you can do with a wisp!"

"Oh, that's now?"

"Yeah, Eggman's plan involves enslaving a whole bunch of them. We've tried to head it off a bunch of times..."

"...But Eggman's frequently better at finding the wisps before we can," Tails finished.

"Well," Rock nodded as he summoned his Mega Man armor and began walking for the entrance to the space elevator, "let's get to work then."

"Welcome to Eggman's Incredible Interstellar Amusement Park: Eggmanland! Where you can enjoy five planets for the price of one!"

"That explains the admission prices," Rock noted with dry amusement. (4)

"Yeah, that's Eggman for ya," Sonic nodded. "Big on schemes, low on sense. And loves to hear his lips flap. Real shame too. This place is pretty epic after all."

"Yeah," Tails agreed. "If Eggman ever actually did reform he could make a fortune."

"Yeah, everyone and their brother would want to come!"

"Everyone and their brother just might be able to afford a single ticket between them," Rock reminded them. "The prices alone are either criminal, or should be. Eggman flunked business class, didn't he?"

"Probably, but don't say that to his face," Sonic chuckled and looked upwards at the serene blue planet 'above' them. "Still, that is one nice view. Never gets old, that."

"Notice the lovely planet floating in the sky above you," Eggman's voice came over the P.A. system again, "soon to be the property of Eggman Enterprises."

"And then Eggman says stuff like that and ruins it... What do you say we cut to the chase and just go foil his latest plot?"

The P.A. system chose that moment to broadcast another announcement. "Please refrain from foiling evil schemes, plots, and odd plans while inside the park. Foiling is strictly prohibited."

"Oh, put a sock in it already!"

"Eggmanland has been constructed entirely out of a sense of remorse for my past transgressions and is in no way associated with any sort of evil plot or premeditated misdeeds."

"Yeehaw! Git along little alien!"

'Eggman, you are such a liar...' Rock sighed as he watched the duo of Orbot and Cubot chase a few wisps around with a net and a ray gun.

"Well, looks like that's our cue t–"

"HYPER!" Sonic was cut off as a white figure crashed down into the tableau and moved to defend the wisps from their pursuers, leveling an arm cannon at the smaller robots.

"Okay, that's new..."

"What in tarnation do you think you're doin–" Cubot began, only to have his net incinerated by a large blinding white buster shot. "–err..."

"Oh, dear..." Orbot fiddled with his ray gun for a moment as Cubot began backing up nervously.

"Now, ah..." Cubot stared down the arm cannon, "just hold on a minute there, pardner! I was just doin' mah duty!"

"Ah, there's the electronic disruptor setting!" Orbot declared happily before blasting the white figure, who seized up as sparks ran over his form before collapsing in like a statue someone tipped over. Upon impact with the ground a small white wisp with a spit-curl antenna on its forehead was ejected, turning the white robot into a very basic unpainted steel bodyframe.

"Huh, I've never actually seen Orbot's raygun hit anything before..." Tails blinked. (5)

Rock was already moving, pointing his own arm cannon at the ray gun and blasting it out of Orbot's hand.

"Hey, wait up!" Sonic called after him right before a cyan wisp that had broken off from the others collided with the hedgehog and was absorbed straight into his body. "Whoa, wait... Calm down! I can't contr–"

Sonic's words were drowned out as he turned into a living laser beam and shot off deeper into the amusement park.

"Uh-oh!" Cubot gulped as Rock landed between the wisps and the two robots. "It's the Mega Sheriff!"

"Oh, dear..." Orbot observed, "this could be a problem..."

Rock was about to make a declaration when the white wisp from before entered his body and he felt a massive surge of energy as his armor turned stark white.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: WHITE BUSTER

He tried to control it, but the wisp was panicking and it was interfering with Rock's ability to control his systems. He was desperately trying to hold back the buster fire that the wisp was trying to force out at the same time, resulting in the 'White Buster' charging up.

"It's alright!" he tried to assure the wisp inside him. "I've got it un–"

That was when the massive blazing white buster shot tore out the end of his arm cannon, just barely missing the defensive modes of Orbot and Cubot as it obliterated several structures and shops, creating a massive furrow in the ground before it finally dissipated.

"I reckon we should leave afore he figgures out how ta aim that..." Cubot trembled as he began moving his geometric form away as quickly as he dared.

"Agreed..." Orbot rolled after his comrade.

"Zere you are, villain!" Antoine pointed his sword at the form of Eggman, lounging casually in the air above Angel Island in his Egg Mobile. (6) "Return ze princess and Amy at once!"

"What Sugah-Twan said," Bunnie glared. "Or are we gonna have ta get rough? Please say yes..."

"Oh-ho-ho-ho!" the rotund man laughed as he held up a pair of purple-backed cards. "No need to worry! They're sound asleep, right here in these cards!"

"EGGMAN!" the familiar roar of Knuckles boomed over the landscape as red form of the Guardian of Angel Island landed in the clearing, followed by the similarly red form of Blues Light, the Proto Man. "RETURN THE MASTER EMERALD AT ONCE!"

"Oh," Eggman grinned casually, holding up another of his cards. "You mean, *this* Master Emerald? Well now, that's a bit of a problem... I can't very well hand over all of my precious card collection... It's so hard to get some of the subjects to sit still for my camera after all... Tell you what? The first one to get to me past my little obstacle course can pick *one* card."

The four growled as Eggman flew off, laughing the whole way.

"Sorry, guys," Blues stated shortly, "but while the backup system for the island is working for now, it won't last forever."

"And we can't let him get away with our friends, sugah."

"It eez to be a race, then, no?"

"Yeah..." Knuckles couldn't help the grin that split his face. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the thrill of competition still got his blood pumping.

Shadow grumbled as he tore through the terrain of Angel Island in pursuit of Dr. Eggman, followed closely by E-123 Omega. Rouge getting kidnapped while Awake was already something he'd never hear the end of, but if Bass ever learned that Treble had been stolen while under Shadow's watch...

"Come on, Silver!" another voice called out from nearby. "We have to find Eggman while he still has information on Nega!"

"Right behind you, Quint!"

"Negative," Omega intoned, drawing the attention of the silver hedgehog and the green-armored clone of Mega Man. "Dr. Eggman will be terminated by us."

"Not before he tells us what he knows!" Quint shot back hotly.

"Race?" Shadow raised an eyebrow at Silver.

Silver nodded back with a grin as the psychokinetic aura fueling his speed gained in intensity. "Race."

"No aliens were harmed in the creation of this park," the voice of the P.A. system echoed across the area. "They were all harmed after the park was created."

Rock grunted as he felt another energy buildup starting. "It's okay! They're gone! No one is going to hurt you! I promise!"

A moment later and the energy died down and a white creature composed of a head, three tendril-like extremities extending from the bottom, two short stereotypically 'alien' antenna, one large eye, and a gravity-defying spitcurl exited Rock's body.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Pum axam se sellupp!" the creature gibbered in a rush. (7) "Hon Pum rech zo faxattro-fedupp zaxat Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail kaxavo vo te saxavo vupp flothlon blem Faxardupp Jesohaxail, Pum paxaningow! Pum jovol voaxank te whaxalm ug! Pum'v sellupp, Pum'v sellupp, Pum'v sellupp!"

"Hold on a moment," Tails dug out a handheld device. He probably could have brought out a finished translator, but the 'baseline challenge run' was as good an excuse as any to see how fast he could pull this off from scratch. "I think I can make alterations to this and get a working transl–"

"Dit nud bino," Rock waved off the alien's concern to Tails's astonishment. "Je whaxalm peno din zo oct. Eut eb culiesitupp, fupp 'Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail', pe ug voaxan 111. Wirupp?"

"Yos! Zaxat nud haxat zo Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail caxarrow whimsorb! Who fuirt zeso fedios bel us wisps te saxavo eep flothlon blem Faxardupp Jesohaxail he waxanks eep Whypol-Ke-En dewol te pe dreck zicks!"

"You can understand him?" Tails continued gaping.

"Remind me to tell you all later about the Loop where everyone spoke in 'Gibberish'," Rock whispered to the fox before turning back to the alien. "Fupp 'dreck zicks', pe ug voaxan ovir zicks?"

"Pum pe jet gned zis weld 'ovir'? Dis dit faxad?"

"Dit nud molupp faxad. Molupp faxad zicks bel molupp faxad loaxasens."

"Zon yos, who waxanks eep Whypol-Ke-En dewol bel up 'ovir' pulpeso!"

Rock nodded as he walked over to the basic steel robot frame that the alien had inhabited and began to examine it.

"Well?" Tails asked.

"It's interesting..." Rock mused as he scanned the robot. "Aside from apparently being tuned to this guy's personal energy frequency for both power and control, the entire thing is nothing more than a mobile variable weapon system. Though whatever that ray gun did completely fried it, so it's more like a pile of burned-out circuits. It'd take days to get it back in order, *with* the proper equipment."

"Zon... Pum whaxavo baxairow..." the white alien looked despondent before turning to Rock with a pleading expression. "Pum vuch axash ug flaxavo eno, proaxaso whorp us! Who dis caxagick eep laxaco pi

wraxainick us eb eep ribo belco! Proaxaso! Saxavo zom! Saxavo zom!"

"Please do not be concerned if you encounter any screaming aliens," the P.A. system chimed in at that moment. "The screams are how they communicate. Really! I promise."

"Of course we'll help! I'm known as Rock."

"And I'm Tails! What's your name?"

"Pum axam caxarrow Yaxangol."

"Nice to meet you, Yacker."

"Yeah," Tails chuckled. "It's always nice to make new friends."

"Speaking of, I wonder where Sonic went..."

"Zo fruo spinupp eno?"

"Ah, he'll be fine," Tails waved the concern off casually. "He's probably only up to his neck in trouble after all."

"It continues to amaze me that you can say things like that and still be completely serious."

"Ow..." Sonic rubbed his head as the cyan wisp left his body and retreated. "Good thing this big ol' welcome sign broke my... Well, I can't really call it a 'fall', can I...?"

The floating globe ringed by a sign that read 'Welcome to Eggmanland' (8) and topped by a face of the bad doctor himself shuddered angrily.

"Please refrain from teasing the robots," Eggman's voice advised over the P.A. system as the sign portions unfolded into arms and a pair of glaring eyes set into the globe opened up and locked onto

Sonic, "as they are very sensitive and require expensive maintenance."

"Well, hey there!" Sonic grinned at the floating killer robot. "You wanna play?"

The robot raised one of its fists and slammed it down where Sonic had been standing a moment before.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'!"

"–nearly enough aliens!" Rock, Tails, and Yacker heard the voice of Eggman as they approached.

"Want us to get more?" the cultured voice of Orbot asked as Rock put a finger to his lips to signal for silence.

"No!" Eggman's voice bit back sarcastically. "I want you to get me a cheeseburger and a shake!"

"That'll be easier!" Cubot's cowboy voice sounded relieved as Tails bit back a bout of laughter from the trio's hiding spot. "Cheeseburgers don't run as fast as them li'l alien varmints!"

"Eh, je!" Yacker whispered worriedly. "Whaxas Faxardupp Jesohaxail dimplisenow axanethol laxaco tee?"

"It's a type of food," Rock explained as Eggman yelled at his literally inclined underling that he wanted more of the alien race captured immediately, if not sooner.

The grumbling of the two smaller robots as they headed off was audible as the three moved closer, before Cubot turned and added "Y'all want fries with that?"

The three heroes were so caught up in the byplay that they didn't quite notice that they had stepped out into Orbot's range of sight until

the robot began backing up nervously.

"Precious little aliens!" Eggman floated downwards in his personal craft, back to the trio of heroes, and examined the capsules of captured wisps, most like Yacker but a few were cyan with two eyes, a slicked-back pointed antenna, two of their three tendrils sleek and pointed with the third that regularly curved into the shape of a stylized lightning bolt as they moved. "I'll harness their Hyper-Go-On power and then nothing will stop me!"

As Orbot continued to back up in the direction of his boss, Rock gave up the stealth approach as a bad job. About the only reason Eggman hadn't noticed him was that Orbot hadn't sounded the alarm.

"I know I say that every time," Eggman spoke to no one in particular, "but this time, really, nothing will stop me!"

"Um..." Orbot finally tried to get Eggman's attention. "Boss...?"

"So," Rock spoke up loud and clear, startling Eggman into whipping around to look at him, Yacker, and Tails straight on, "who exactly are you calling nothing?"

"MEGA MAN?!"

"Wow," Rock chuckled. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Huh?" the confused voice of Cubot interrupted the tableau. Apparently Eggman's other minion had spotted them on his way out too.

"He means that since the boss said 'nothing will stop me' and Mega Man is here to stop him, it's like the boss was calling Mega Man 'nothing'."

Cubot tilted his head in confusion until his neck joint seemed to pop loose.

"A little slow on the uptake is he?" Rock asked.

"You have no idea," Orbot sighed the sigh of the long suffering.

"Fine!" Eggman huffed as he floated up and away in his personal craft, his blast shield sliding into place. "You're so smart, *you* take care of this mess!"

"Orbot." Rock raised an eyebrow as the named minion pointed at himself in shock. "Versus me."

"Release the Big Boy!" Eggman finished as he shot off, Orbot and Cubot following as fast as they could.

A moment later and a what looked like a massive multi-ringed ferris wheel rose up on a series of rotating jet thrusters mounted to its back, with a manic robot attached to it with long arms capable of reaching either end of the ferris wheel of doom that it held on with and a body upon which was mounted a single insanely twitching eye, ringed with armored petals that it closed in an approximation of blinking, that stared out of the ferris wheel of doom's center.

"You two free the wisps," Rock called to Tails and Yacker as he dashed towards Eggman's amusement park monstrosity. "I've got the 'Big Boy'!"

"Roger/Legol!" Tails and Yacker saluted in unison.

"Well, that was fun," Sonic dusted his hands off, the remains of his opponent sparking feebly as most of it lay in one of the larger reflecting pools.

"Please refrain from throwing coins, trash, or small children into the reflecting pools."

"Cool," Sonic smirked at the recorded voice of Eggman, "nothing about throwing giant killer robots in. Guess that means I'm not in

trouble. Wonder what Rock and Tails are up to..."

A mechanical screech echoed across the grounds.

"Hey, a two-fer of giant killer robots! Eggman, you shouldn't have!"

Rock ran angles of attack as he approached. Firing a few test shots revealed that he needed to get closer or his opponent would just close its armor plating over its giant optic, causing his buster shots to bounce off.

The robot twisting the giant multi-tiered ring and rolling it towards him, over buildings and decorative displays like a giant crushing wheel, showed the dangers of getting too close.

'If I can get inside the outermost ring, I can mostly nullify its primary form of attack. I just need a distraction...'

"LASER!" came the yell as a powerful beam of cyan light lanced through the air and seared a hole through one of the robot's arms.

'That'll do,' Rock hopped onto a low wall and pushed off to land on the interior of the ferris wheel of doom while the robot steering it looked towards the source of the laser. A charged shot to the machine's massive optic later and its attention was firmly back on Rock.

With a screech, the machine swiped one of its arms around the outer ring, trying to hit the blue bomber, but he casually hopped over it as another laser hit the mechanized monstrosity in the eye this time.

The ferris wheel of doom shuddered as the giant robot attached to it twitched violently beneath its reflexively closed blast panels and a pure cyan figure landed next to Rock.

It was a female model with what seemed like a racing fin atop her helmet and a body streamlined for speed.

"Alo ug wholo te whorp?" Rock asked, causing the... Cyan Woman if he didn't miss his guess... to start in surprise before nodding silently as the tremors rocking the ferris wheel of doom died down. "Okay, then, let's go for the eye on three! One... two..."

The machine opened the blast panels over its eye suddenly and glared at them with something that, while not really hate, was a darn good simulation.

"LAS–"

"Jump!" Rock yelled as the robot swiped one of its arms down at them forcefully.

CRUNCH!

Rock had cleared the attack in time, but his sudden companion had been in the middle of attacking and hadn't aborted fast enough, getting torn clean in half and reverting to a generic unpainted female model as one of the cyan-colored wisps Rock had seen in Eggman's capsules popped out.

"Eh je!" the alien being gibbered in terror. "Whorp! Whorp! Whorp!"

"Peniz wellupp!" Rock yelled, trying to reassure the alien while he dodged a follow-up swipe. "Pum caxan whaxactro zis!"

"Loi ox? Fut... Pum waxasniz chleck oneugh..."

"You're plenty strong!" Rock retorted as he fired his Mega Buster, only for the shots to ping off the re-closed blast panels. "You just don't have enough experience fighting things like this!"

"Zon... Zon Pum'rr roct ug vupp onolgupp!" the cyan wisp declared before shooting into Rock's body, turning his armor a gleaming cyan all over.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: CYAN LASER

The blast panels opened and Rock aimed his arm cannon straight at the giant glaring optic.

"LASER!" he yelled, firing a massive beam of light straight through the center of the killer machine's optic, causing a chain reaction to begin.

"We here at Eggmanland consider ourselves the universe's first fully green amusement park," Eggman's voice echoed from the P.A. system. "Although the green is from all the nausea and vomiting, but still: Green is green!" (9)

"Ew..." Tails made a face as he fiddled with his handheld Miles Electric under the watchful eye of Yacker and a couple of other curious wisps that had stuck around after being freed. "Okay, now I just tweak this and adjust that. And done!"

"Done with what?" Sonic asked as he skidded to a halt a few steps too far and moonwalked back.

"Oh, a translator to talk to these guys like Rock can," Tails informed him idly. "Where've you been anyway?"

"Eh," Sonic shrugged. "I did a little shopping, grabbed a snack, trashed a giant killer robot posing as the welcome sig–wait, big blue can do *what* now?"

"Speak their language," Tails suppressed a chuckle, determined to act like this was no big deal in spite of Sonic's flabberghasted expression. (10) "You said this place had shopping?"

"Well, less than it did before," the voice of Rock cut in as he walked up, dusting himself off and followed by a cyan wisp that Yacker greeted cheerfully. "Honestly, this place would be pretty awesome if Eggman actually put in enough effort to even pretend to care about his potential visitors."

"The unfiltered starlight from the lovely constellations above is full of deadly radiation!" the P.A. system announced helpfully. "Help yourselves to our complimentary SPF-3000 Starblock. And by complimentary, I mean quite expensive."

"Case in point," Rock gestured in the general direction of a speaker. "Whoupp, Taxairs! Pum soo ug biniskow yeep slaxansraxatel. Dit welkick?"

"Well, it's not doing the peppermint twist," Tails grinned and made an adjustment to the device.

"Cool," Rock chuckled. "Hey, Yacker. Everyone get away safely?"

"Eb ceulso, flaxavo eno! Who eb twe taxairs whaxad zom axarr bloo din pit vemonk!"

Tails lost his composure and burst out laughing for a moment before getting himself under control and making another adjustment to his device. "Tails of two cities... heh..."

"You guys are gonna be doing this all day, aren't you?" Sonic groaned.

Rock and Yacker turned remarkably similar smiling expressions at the hedgehog.

" *That's* a yes..." the blue blur shook his head. "Anyway, you all know what Eggman's up to, right? Well I picked up a map showing how to get to his other little areas."

"Enjoy every moment in the luxurious grounds as if they might be your last. Especially if you're a meddlesome hedgehog or a bothersome blue robot."

"What, no mention for me?" Tails looked offended after the announcement finished.

"Or their fawning vulpine sidekick."

"Better."

Orbot sighed to himself as he absently processed Cubot's complaints at having to clean up the mess of destroyed robot. *'Ah, sometimes I wish the boss would send us out for more than menial labor... Of course, then I remember that would likely end with me like this poor fellow and all is right with the world.'*

Cubot went back to work and plopped a large piece in the refuse bin he was hauling.

"Hmm... we seem to be missing an arm..." Orbot realized suddenly. "Did you spot another arm?"

"Naw, but really how much can it... Hey, there it is, over yonder!" (11)

"Oh, dear, that poor souvenir stand... Ah, well, it's on the way to where Globotron got smashed."

"Aw, we gotta clean him up too?"

"Next stop: the Sweet Mountain," the transport announced helpfully as it sped off along the glowing chain towards what looked like a massive floating pastry orb. "Enjoying our candy paradise is the perfect way to celebrate your next birthday. Or to avoid reaching it."

"You know, I wonder what the others are doing about now..." Sonic mused.

"Now, villain!" Antoine leveled his sword in Eggman's direction. "Hand ovair ze princess and Amy!"

"Y'all heard the man!" Bunnie leveled her cybernetic arm in cannon mode at the man.

"Hmm..." Eggman grinned as he stroked his chin idly. "I suppose I could part with one if you win my little contest..."

"Contest?!" Knuckles growled out as Blues frowned. "You said you'd hand one over to whoever won the race!"

"Really?" the man feigned confusion from his personal craft. "I don't remember saying anything like that..."

"Why you dirty rotten stinking–" Knuckles's attempt to not use the more colorful language he'd picked up in the Loops was cut off by a new arrival.

"EGGMAN!" Quint shouted as the ground where he landed shook from the force of his feet-first impact. "Tell us where Nega is!"

"And hand over Rouge and Treble!" Shadow growled as he landed next, followed by Silver and Omega.

"Dear me, this is getting crowded..." Eggman seemed unconcerned. "Why don't you talk it over with my little friends, hmm?"

With a snap of his fingers, a pair of armored turtle robots popped up from below and moved to engage both groups.

"Tarnation!" Bunnie changed her aim to the new foes.

"Well, you have fun!" Eggman grinned as he began moving away while waving a brightly colored camera. "I'm off to turn more things into cards!"

"GET BACK HERE!" Knuckles and Shadow yelled as they took off in pursuit, followed by Blues and Omega, leaving the other two pairs behind to face the machines.

"Bet we can take ours out faster than y'all can, sugah," Bunnie smirked.

"I'll take that bet," Silver grinned back before Quint could object.

"Welcome to the Sweet Mountain," the local P.A. system cheerfully informed the group as they beheld the endless array of pastry-like terrain before them, having actually landed far away from the base of the glowing chain that held the mini-planet in place. "Insulin will be provided at a marginal extra cost. And by marginal, we mean enormous."

"I cannot even begin to list all the things wrong with this place," Rock looked around at the giant donuts, mountain-sized cake formations, lollipop pillars, and all other manner of enormous sweets used to construct a sugar overdose so massive that it could induce a diabetic fit from sight alone.

"Pum wectol holo zo enos he wolo sonk wholo axalo?" Yacker murmured. "Pum whepo jethick whaxapponow te zom..."

"Well, I don't know where Eggman might be keeping the wisps," Tails looked up from his device towards the base of the glowing chain in the distance, "but I think that's where the map said the power for this area of the park was."

Of course, Tails didn't mention that was where it usually was when Eggman pulled this stunt. For one, he'd prefer not to confuse Yacker and the cyan wisp that had tagged along, and for another just because that was what *usually* happened didn't mean that was what *would* happen this time around.

"Sounds like a good place to start," Sonic nodded. "Wanna make a race of i–"

"DRILL!" was all the warning they got before the cake-like ground before them burst in a geyser of sugary crumbs and several forms emerged. Many were wisps of the white and cyan variety, but there were also yellow wisps with pointy triangular single-eyed heads and red wisps with tri-eyed heads in a shape that evoked the image of flames. Amidst their number was two robots, one yellow and one red. The yellow one had a drill-shaped helmet that extended down over

the torso with shoulder-pads that looked like they folded down to make one big drill. The Yellow Man also had arms tipped with drills as well. The Red Man on the other hand had a helmet that evoked flames much like the red wisps and seemed to spurt fire from his joints every few moments.

"Ug'lo ekaxaupp!" Yacker seemed relieved to see the two robots. "Pum waxas welliow ug weurdniz fo axabtol zo fedupp Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail vaxado bel vo waxas foaxaton, fut ug'lo bino! Whed whaxavo ug baxalow? Pum'mo fleudd whorp! Zo flaxavo eno, zo spinupp eno, pi zo eno eb twe taxairs whaxavo whorpow us kloaxatrupp!"

"It was nothing," Rock rubbed his head in embarrassment. "But we are here to help. Do you know where the generator for this place is?"

"BURST!" the red robot nodded amidst a sudden flaring of fire from his body and gestured in the same direction that they group had guessed before.

"Well, then, let's go!" Sonic grinned before taking off.

"Enjoy the rides, but be careful. The seats can be sticky."

"Something wrong?" Blues asked as he and Knuckles raced Shadow and Omega to catch Eggman first.

"Just wondering where the Chaotix are in this mess. Shade said they'd just gotten a case involving Eggman after all..."

"We hope you're enjoying this sunny day here at the park," Eggman's voice echoed. "Sadly, a sunny day once again mean that the Choco-Coaster is out of service. Due to melting."

"Heh... That's what you get Baldy McNosehair," Sonic chuckled as he looked up the steep incline before turning to his temporary

companion. "Ready to make with the magic little guy?"

"Loaxadupp!" the orange wisp replied, its two vertically arranged eyes on its ovoid head gaining a determined expression before merging with Sonic.

"ROCKET!" the hedgehog yelled as he turned into a glowing orange rocket and shot straight up into the sky.

"*sigh*... Sonic is never going to learn how to wait for people, is he?" Rock asked as he and the others stood at the base of one of the pastry mountains.

"There's no line at Bake Me Crazy, the ride that simulates what it's like to be baked like a cake. The ride itself lasts an amazing 20 to 25 minutes, or until golden brown. Not recommended for our guests who are sensitive to temperatures exceeding 350 degrees."

"Probably not," Tails shrugged as Red Man and a red wisp that had been freed actually looked interested in the announcement. "Why do you think we've all learned how to run so fast?"

"There is that," Rock allowed with a sage nod that Yacker mimicked. "Well, we've got two options. We can go over the mountain, or we can go through it.

Yellow Man and Red Man looked at each other for a moment before Yellow Man revved his drill arms loudly with a cry of "DRILL!"

"Well, that sounds like a vote for 'through'," Rock grinned. "Do I have a second?"

"Pum socect!" a yellow wisp they'd recently freed chirped before it merged with Rock, turning his armor a bright yellow.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: YELLOW DRILL

"Any opposed?" Rock asked as the P.A. apologized for using day-old donuts on some of the rides, getting shaken heads all around. "Then let's go! DRILL!"

A massive spinning yellow drill formed from Rock's outstretched arm and rapidly burrowed into the pastry mountain at the same time as Yellow Man shifted to his own drill form and did the same.

"Hey, wait for me!" Tails yelled as the red wisp merged with him. "BURST!"

A moment later and the flame-wreathed form of Red Man was tearing down one of the tunnels while a red fox-head with glowing eyes and trailing two tails tore down the other in its own wreath of flames.

"Us tee!" Yacker and the cyan wisp declared as they followed.

"You think you can hurry up with that password?" Vector hissed urgently. "We're on kind of a time crunch here, you know."

"I know," Espio shushed his friend, "but it's imperative that we remain undetected for as long as possible. If it becomes necessary–"

"–then that's why you brought me along," Mighty finished.

"Well, that glowing generator looks like a pretty obvious target," Rock observed as he looked across the lake of candy syrup at the metal structure with the purple glowing energy arc atop it. There was a land, or cake, bridge across but no other obvious means of access.

"Yeah," Tails agreed, "and it's probably where they're keeping the rest of the wisps."

"Rot nud ke zon!" Yacker and the cyan wisp yelled before they, along with Yellow Man and Red Man began to dash towards the cake

bridge, only for a massive ship to crash up out of the lake near them.

The ship was an old-style sailing galleon made from, by the looks of it, gingerbread and hard icing intertwined with metal. The sails were black with a stylized image of Eggman's face above crossed cutlasses. It also had a full broadside of cannons aimed in their general direction.

"Visitors are cautioned to avoid feeding, petting, or saving any aliens," the P.A. system chided as the cannons took better aim at the group.

"That sounds like as good a reason as any to throw caution to the wind," Rock observed as he stared calmly upwards towards the ship's deck where an egg-shaped robot in a purple metal captain's jacket, matching hat, eyepatch, and a pair of arms. One arm held a giant lollipop like a war axe as the robot hopped and spun threateningly, a crew of smaller armless egg-shaped robots hopping around him. "So, how are we doing this, Captain Candybeard? Easy or hard?"

The robot replied by leveling his lollipop weapon at the group in a clear 'charge' command.

"DRILL!"

"BURST!"

Yellow Man dove underground and Red Man wreathed himself in flames as the cannons fired.

"Somehow I knew you'd say that!" Rock hardened his gaze as he dodged around the shots and took aim at the descending Egg Crew.

The crew landed and Rock took aim, only for Yellow Man to burst up in the center of his opponents, destroying several but also forcing Rock to check his shot.

"Mega Man!" Tails called out as the cyan wisp entered his body. "I'm going to try and disable the ship! LASER!"

"Got it!" Rock nodded as he dove out of the way of Red Man's flames when the other Color Master charged haphazardly into the fray.

A few long moments later of Red Man and Yellow Man attacking the Egg Crew wildly and Rock trying to avoid becoming or creating a friendly fire casualty and the ship shuddered before listing badly, causing the captain to spill out into the battlefield.

"Wait!" Rock yelled as he saw Yellow Man begin to charge straight for the captain, as well as the cannons mounted on the ship's deck turn towards him.

"DRILL!"

'Captain Candybeard' pointed his lollipop at Yellow Man and the cannons answered by blasting the charging robot repeatedly. A spray of unpainted metal later and a yellow wisp came tumbling back, looking very dizzy and disoriented.

"Zaxat idniz ke axas praxannow..."

"No, but I still need your help," Rock implored, getting a nod as the wisp merged with him.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: YELLOW DRILL

"DRILL!" he yelled, forming the spinning energy before him and diving underground.

'Captain Candybeard' was too preoccupied trying to fend off Red Man with cannons, crew, and lollipop to notice the way the ground was rumbling before Rock came up from straight under him, tearing a huge gash in his armor and sending the robot captain flying.

But not destroying him. 'Captain Candybeard' flipped back up hopping and twirling in fury before his lollipop did something very interesting. The round top twisted ninety degreed and extended from the center to form a drill of its own which spun for a moment before the robot dove underground with it.

Rock was about to follow when a deluge of Egg Crew landed and began hopping about the area wildly. His preparations to follow the robot captain left him off-guard enough that a couple slammed into him, disrupting his union with the wisp who popped back out. And promptly began ducking and weaving in a panic to avoid all the robots, much like Yacker was doing.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Hold on!" the yell of Tails was heard before he dove into the fray, punching, kicking, and tail-swatting Egg Crew all over the place.

Rock and Tails were so caught up in fending off the Egg Crew that they missed the mild tremors of a returning drill. But Red Man noticed and turned towards the young fox.

"BURST!" the flames made enough of a hole in the swarm of Egg Crew for Red Man to dash through and push Tails out of the way. Just in time for the lollipop drill to punch through his own metal body instead, tearing it in half even as it reverted to an unpainted generic male-type frame.

"Wee! Zaxat waxas bun!" the red wisp seemed a bit giddy as he tumbled out of the carnage. "Pum waxannaxa ke en Faxako Vo Claxazupp joxt!" (12)

"Yeah," Rock replied as he caught the red alien, "well, we need to finish this first."

"Ket dit!" the red wisp nodded before darting into Rock's body, turning his armor a rich red all over.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: RED BURST

"Tails!" Rock called out. "Get Yacker and the others underground! It's about to get hot up here!"

"Right!" Tails acknowledged as the yellow wisp merged with him and he dove into the pastry terrain, followed by Yacker and the cyan wisp. "DRILL!"

"As for you..." Rock leveled a glare at 'Captain Candybeard', his hopping Egg Crew, and his ship for good measure as he charged up until he was all but a micro-sun of intense flames before releasing it all in every direction. "BURST!"

"We know they look delicious, but please refrain from licking the rides. That would be disgusting. Do you know where those rides have been? People have been sitting on those rides! With their BUTTS! Okay, go ahead. Lick them. Don't say we didn't warn you."

"Ick..." Sonic made a face as the latest P.A. quip reached his ears through the wind around him as he freefell through the mini-planet's sky towards his destination. He had to admit, this was a pretty sweet feeling. And at this rate he'd get there long before–

A massive explosion of flame erupted from the general direction he was headed.

"Aw, man!" he sulked. "They beat me there? Now there's not gonna be any bots left to trash..."

"I spy with my little eye something black and brooding," Roll smiled. (13)

"I am *not* brooding!" (14) Bass shot back from where he was held immobile in a stasis capsule, just like Roll was. "And will you stop trying to play these stupid games?!"

"What else do you suggest we do?"

"Maybe, I don't know, *getting out before I explode from sheer boredom?!* "

"Well, if you've got any ideas, feel free to share them," Roll huffed as the sound of a door opening caught both their attentions.

"Pum'v sellupp!" a floating one-eyed white being cried out in a panicked tone as it held two of its three tendrils up to its mouthless face in shock. "Pum idniz voaxan te ichulf yeep locevolupp!"

"Oh, great..." Bass moaned.

"Don't mind him," Roll smiled as a thought began to form in her mind, "and we'd be glad for the company actually."

"Ug weurd?"

"Just what I've always wanted..." Bass groused. "To talk with a floating party favor I can't understand. Yay."

"Oh, hush you," Roll sniped back before returning her smile to the being. "Don't mind him. he's always been a grouch."

"Hey!"

"And, there!" Tails declared as he finished disabling the generator. The glowing energy arc winked out and relay towers nearby began retracting to standby positions before the glow surrounding the chain tethering the mini-planet in place faded away leaving a translucent tether behind.

A skidding sound was heard as Sonic came to an abrupt stop nearby. "Aw, man! I missed everything, didn't I?"

"Zaxat nud haxat ug kot bel foick tred, spinupp eno!" the red wisp replied cheerfully, causing Rock and Yacker, shortly followed by Tails

since he'd had to read it from his device, to crack up hysterically.

"Man, I'm even missing the jokes now..." Sonic shook his head. "So I take it big blue's getting the hang of the Hyper-Go-On stuff, right?"

"Well," Tails wiped tears of mirth from his eyes, snickering a bit, "he's not getting the hang of horrible body odor, that's for sure."

"I try not to overclock my circuits that much," Rock shrugged as Tails and Sonic burst out laughing this time. "What? Did I miss something?"

"Dib ug id, Pum id," Yacker shrugged himself.

"Next stop: the Starlight Carnival," the transport declared happily as it approached the massive space fleet, the flagship tethered to the main park by a glowing chain like Sweet Mountain had been. "The sheer scale of our illuminated space fleet is sure to make you feel small and insignificant by comparison."

"Ergh..." Sonic made a face. "I was gonna make a comment about feeling like what Eggman's clearly compensating for, but I grossed myself out."

"I did not need to know that," (15) Rock facepalmed, mimicked by Yacker.

"Alright Eggman!" Knuckles threatened. "Hand over the Master Emerald!"

"Grr..." the rotund man growled out as the two duos stared him down.

"We require the return of our comrades Rouge and Treble if you wish to remain intact," Omega added.

"Not so fast!" came a new yell as Quint landed amidst the tableau heavily, followed shortly by Silver, Antoine, and Bunnie. "We need information from him first!"

"You're all annoying pests!" Eggman fumed in his craft as a pair of airborne machines descended from the sky. "I'll crush you with my mechanical pets!"

"I believe ze phrase eez 'bring it', no?" Antoine readied his blade.

"I believe you're right," Blues smirked as he readied his arm cannon. "We'll see who crushes who."

"You think you've won, don't you?" Eggman declared dramatically as the remains of his Egg Hawks smoldered.

"Yah bet we do!" Bunnie retorted confidently as all eight of the heroes stared the madman down.

"Well, we'll see who's laughing when I do this!" Eggman held up one of his cards and there was a bright flash of light. When it died down, each pair found themselves in a carnival-like area.

At night.

"Where did tha others go?" Bunnie asked in confusion as she and Antoine got their bearings. "Heck, where did we go?"

"Damnit Eggman!" Shadow fumed. "You won't get away with this! Come on Omega!"

"Hey, wait fer us!" Bunnie yelled as she and Antoine took off after Shadow and Omega.

"Okay, we're here and we need to get to the flagship," Tails noted as they disembarked the transport. He was about to continue when

alarms began blaring and blast doors closed, barring the way forward.

"We seem to be loosing pressure on the Level 17," the P.A. system informed them. "Please hold your breath against the harsh vacuum of space, until you pass out from oxygen starvation. After that you won't care. Enjoy the ride!"

"Zaxat... seucts faxad," the yellow wisp noted.

"Yeah, whatever he said," Sonic added. "Rock?"

"I think it's more likely we tripped an alarm, or that this is just part of how this area screws with visitors," Rock noted. "In any case, I'm not reading a drop in pressure. In fact, I think there's a general atmosphere bubble being held in place around this whole fleet for some reason."

"Hupp weurd Faxardupp Jesohaxail pe zaxat?"

"Who knows?" Tails shrugged. "Right now, we need to get through those doors."

"Leave it to me and Yacker," Rock stepped forward. "Ready Yacker?"

"Loaxadupp!" Yacker chirped before merging with Rock, turning his armor white once again.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: WHITE BUSTER

"Here we go!" Rock yelled as he charged up and aimed for the doors. "HYPER!"

The massive blast of blinding white plasma blew through the doors like they were nothing, and splashed off a wall of shimmering blue cubes. The wall then faded revealing a large group of wide-eyed wisps and an orange female robot themed like a rocket-pack space adventurer stepped forward and pointed an arm cannon at them...

"RO–"

...only for the cyan, yellow, and red wisps to interpose themselves and begin gibbering quickly.

"Dit nud ekaxaupp!"

"Yoaxah, zoupp'lo um us!"

"Zoupp'lo wholo te whorp!"

"Zoupp idniz gned ug wolo faxang zolo!"

Two more robots stepped forward as the Orange Woman lowered her weapon. One a blue male model seemingly made entirely of blocks and a green male model that had a much more rounded body type and evoked the feeling of a stereotypical UFO.

"Wow, three this time. Nice!" Sonic grinned as he noted the group of wisps, composed of mostly white wisps like Yacker, but also a bunch of orange rocket-shaped wisps, the three-eyed cube-headed blue wisps, and the single-eyed UFO-like green wisps.

Yacker chose that moment to pop out of Rock and float over to the three robots.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Pum'v kraxad te soo ug! Zoso flaxavo wholeos whaxavo cemo te whorp us riko zo Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail id! Eno eb ug caxan taxako ovolyeno faxang te Praxanot Wisp din zo slaxanspelt fohict us hiro zo ethols whorp us bloo zo loch!"

The Orange Woman, Blue Man, and Green Man looked at each other for a moment before the Blue Man gestured for the wisps to follow him and made for one of the transport craft while the Green Man and Orange Woman remained behind.

"So, I guess you're coming along to kick Baldy McNosehair butt?" Sonic grinned.

"HOVER!" Green Man rose up off the floor and became encased in a shimmering forcefield.

"I'll take that as a yes," Rock chuckled.

"If you're experiencing explosive decompression," the P.A. announced as the transport with the wisps aboard left, "please try to avoid staining the seat cushions. Those things are expensive."

"You know what would be really nice?" Roll asked as Bass yawned with unnecessary drama for the umpteenth time.

"Haxat?"

"If I could talk with my dad back on the planet. Let him know I'm recovering and all. He tends to worry a lot when he doesn't hear from me."

"Sulo zick!" the alien being chirped before zooming over to the room's console... and looking at it with total puzzlement. "With... Whed pe Pum uso zis?"

"It's not that hard," Roll smiled patiently. "I'll walk you through it..."

"Remember, for your safety, please avoid–"

"LASER!"

BOOM!

"As well as–"

"HYPER!"

KA-BOOM!

"Never under any circumstances–"

"ROCKET!"

KRAKA-BOOM-BOOM!

"–as it is actually a living being, and will bite your face off."

"Wow, we're really going to town on these ships..." Sonic mused as the group dashed out of the exploding ship and across one of the many 'light-paths' that interconnected the fleet.

"Attention ladies and gentlemen! Please make your way over to the main viewing area, where the Light Speed Electrical Parade is about to begi–"

The P.A. system cut off as a series of light flashes zoomed across the space around the heroes before vanishing.

"Ohoh, and... and that concludes the Light Speed Electrical Parade."

"Geez, I hate to say this," Sonic grimaced, "but some things you need to slow down a bit..."

"Jod skip axaheupp!" Yacker informed them as they approached the next part of the fleet.

"Attention!" the P.A. system announced. "The anti-gravity toilets on this level are out of order. We are sorry for this inconvenience, and hope that you can hold it for another twenty thousand light years."

"Aw, man, I wish he hadn't said that..." Sonic groaned. "Now I have to go..."

"What do you want this time, Albert?" Dr. Light sighed as he finally answered the call. "I..." Dr. Light blinked as he stared into the single

eye of the being on the other end of the line. "You're not Albert Wily..."

"Whorre Foaxald Vaxan!" the being chirped happily. "Zo nico yorred biddick raxadupp waxankow te taxark te ug!"

"Hey dad!" the voice of Roll came from behind the being, prompting the fascinating creature to float aside so he could see his daughter.

Suspended in one of Dr. Wily's stasis tubes.

"Roll?" he started in shock. "My word! What happened?!"

"Oh, Dr. Wily invited me and Bass over to his place for the usual and I got a little more banged up than I expected," Roll shrugged nonchalantly and Dr. Light finally noticed Bass in a second tube. Making rude faces and mockingly mimicking talking motions. "Wily was nice enough to lend his facilities for our recovery, and Bass is just as intolerable a patient as he is anything else."

"Hey!" Bass looked insulted as the strange being giggled at his antics.

"I see..." Dr. Light blinked as he went with the calm tone of the call. He was sure Roll had a reason for making things seem less alarming than they looked from his end.

"Anyway, I'm recovering nicely, but it's kind of boring up here at the moment and I missed everyone."

"I'm sure," Dr. Light made himself smile. "I feel much the same way anytime I have to stay overnight at the hospital myself."

"I know, right?" Roll smiled back. "Plus Wily's said we can't have visitors yet, so it's been pretty lonely until this little explorer wandered in."

"Whoho... sellupp," the floating white, and likely alien, creature rubbed its proportionately huge head sheepishly.

"Don't be," Roll assured the being before returning her attention to Dr. Light. "Anyway, I was wondering if you'd be willing to send Tango on up to keep us company and help with our quiet recovery?"

"Why, yes," Dr. Light began to get the drift. "I can certainly do that. I'll send Rush and Beat along as well if you don't mind. Maybe even Eddie if Auto can spare him."

"Not at all."

"Please refrain from peeling off the special space-age polymer holding the starship together. It may look and feel like duct tape, but it's not. It's called..." the announcement paused as Eggman apparently scrambled for something believable. "Ehm... Space tape!" and failed miserably. "Very advanced stuff. Thank you."

"Well, that explains why the ships have been falling apart so easily," Rock noted as the group approached the generator on the deck of the flagship.

"Heh... no kidding," Sonic chuckled.

"Zis dis pit loi ox fig spaxacoskip..." the yellow wisp muttered as he and the others followed the group.

"No kidding," Tails nodded, as did Green Man and Orange Woman. "And Eggman could be hiding anywhere in it."

"True," Sonic agreed, "but knowing Baldy McNosehair he's probably hiding right behind the generator waiting to spring a trap on us."

"WHAT?! HOW DID YOU..." the fuming voice of Eggman rang out before apparently realizing that he'd given himself away. "Er... The Hyper Sleep Ride is now open. Remember, the Hyper Sleep Ride is not recommended for pregnant women, or people who aren't willing to be asleep for three years. Why don't you try it out? Eggmanland will still be here when you wake up."

"Yeah, nice try Baldy McNosehair," Sonic smirked.

"Just come on out and let's get this over with," Rock added as he prepared his arm cannon.

"As you wish..." Eggman's voice sounded from behind the generator. "Just hold that pose and say CHEESE!"

With the last word, Eggman's personal craft whipped out from behind the generator, pointing an odd-looking ray gun in the group's direction.

"Bring i–whoa!" Sonic had gotten ready as Eggman slammed his hand down on a button, only to be thrown to the ground as Rock was shoved into him.

"Ooof!" Rock grunted and looked up at the one who'd pushed him to see Orange Woman convulsing in the throes of a sinister purple ray from Eggman's craft.

"Elaxacko Wemaxan!" Yacker and the other wisps cried out in alarm as they backed up behind Green Man.

"Hey! Let her go!" Tails yelled as he charged at Eggman, only for Orange Woman to turn around and point her arm cannon at him, her eyes glowing the same purple as the ray. (16)

"R *OC* **KET!"** she yelled as a glowing orange rocket wreathed in a dark purple miasma was fire at a frantically backpedalling Tails.

"HOVER!" Green Man interposed his body between Tails and the projectile, but even with his shimmering forcefield he was thrown back from the impact.

"Hohohohoho!" Eggman laughed. "Not what I was going for, but I'll take it!"

"Haxat id ug pe te eep blioct?!"

"Oh, she works for me now!" Eggman continued laughing.

"What did you do Eggman?" Rock demanded.

"Me? Nothing!" Eggman feigned insult. "Unless shooting Albert's little alien-powered tinkertoy with a mind control ray that runs on alien life force counts as something." Eggman twirled his mustache arrogantly as he said this. "Does it?"

"HOVER!" Green Man recovered and shot forward towards Eggman encased in his forcefield, only for the controlled Orange Woman to take aim at him again.

"ROC *KE* **T!"**

Green Man was blown back by the impact once more and barely stopped his tumble before hitting the others.

"To get to me, you're going to have to go through your comrade here. Unless she goes through you first!"

" *RO* **CKET!"** Orange Woman fired at Sonic this time.

"HOVER!" Green Man deliberately moved in front of the attack and took it.

"ROCK *ET* **!"** a shot went for the wisps.

"HOVER!" Green Man took the impact again, but even with his forcefield, his robot body was starting to smoke and spark.

"RO *CK* **ET!"** the next shot went for Mega Man before Green Man even had time to recover from the last one.

"HOV–" the blast slammed into Green Man in the middle of raising his forcefield and tried to push him back, but the hover jets in his boots flared with force and pushed back hard enough to keep him in place. "–ER!"

BOOM!

A spray of undecorated steel and a green wisp tumbled into Rock's arms.

"Oh, this is so much better than I could have dreamed!" Eggman gloated. "And I only used a small prototype!"

"Proaxaso... saxavo vupp blioct..." the alien muttered before merging with Rock, turning his armor a bright green all over.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: GREEN HOVER

"I will," Rock promised as he stared down Eggman even as Orange Woman was charging her weapon, and directing its force into her feet rather than her arm cannon. He stared at her and for a moment her eyes returned to normal and she nodded in understanding before Eggman's control was reasserted.

" *R* **O** *C* **K** *E* **T** *!* **"** she yelled as she rocketed forward on her own power.

"HOVER!" Rock yelled back as he shot forward on anti-gravity boosters and covered in a powerful forcefield, his arm pulled back to punch his oncoming opponent. Rock's fist met the controlled Orange Woman's helmet and the two struggled to push the other back for several long seconds before Orange Woman's thrust gave out. Rock's forcefield-covered fist tore through her body, the orange rapidly fading to an uncolored steel as the orange wisp inside tumbled free.

"And now you're mine Mega Man!" Eggman laughed.

"Yacker!" Rock called out, prompting the white wisp to shoot forward and merge with him even as the green wisp left.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: WHITE BUSTER

"Eh?" Eggman stared in shock before he noticed that his ray was no longer firing. "Lousy cheep alien..."

"HYPER!" Rock yelled as he began firing blazing white plasma shots the size of his normal charged shots, but without having to charge them first.

"Damn it! Why didn't it work?!" Eggman screamed to the heavens as his craft was rocked from the impacts. And spotted the energy taks connected to the back. The empty energy tanks. "Oh. Out of jui–"

BOOM!

The last shot sent his craft tumbling to the ground, where Eggman fell out and landed on his head...

...which popped off, leaving the neck to spark from severed wires.

"Who nud pit lefet tee?!"

"More like a fake..." Tails sighed.

"Well," Eggman's voice came from the robot double, "I could hardly put myself at such blatant risk with dangerous opponents about, now could I?"

"Hasn't stopped you before," Sonic noted with a raised eyebrow.

"In any case, I now know the energy requirements of my latest invention. And I can get more Hyper-Go-On power! Lots more! And then I'll be able to not just control one meddlesome interloper, but the whole universe! In the meantime, enjoy the park! I'll even leave you your own private tour guide!"

A rather large weapons platform, with two whale-shaped neon blimp-things emblazoned with Eggman's stylized face supporting it, rose up beside the flagship and turned to take aim at the remaining heroes.

"My Frigate Orcan has the shutdown code for the generator, so have fun getting it from him!" Eggman's voice laughed from the dummy of himself. "Of course, you could just blow up the generator and die in the chain reaction. That works too."

Frigate Orcan began moving away from the flagship over one of the light-paths that crisscrossed the area.

"Don't let it get away!" Rock yelled before all of the weapons on the craft opened fire, forcing the group to dive for cover.

"Please note that this ride is not safe for children under or over thirteen. It is also not safe for thirteen year olds," the P.A. system declared helpfully.

"Is it just me, or is this thing acting a lot more dangerous that what we're used to from Baldy McNosehair?" Sonic asked.

"Doesn't matter," Rock motioned to the green wisp. "I have a plan."

"Hohoho! That's right!" Eggman laughed in his control room. "Cower before the might of my Frigate Orcan! Tremble as you try and figure out a way past enough firepower to give even the most headstrong speedster pause! There's nothing you can do! Hohohohoho!"

"Uh... except charge right in?" Cubot asked in confusion.

"Yes! Except charge right... what?" Eggman paused in his gloating as he processed that.

"See?" Cubot pointed to the monitor. "That hombre Mega Man is coming straight at it!"

Eggman stared at the screen as a green-armored Mega Man was flying, or perhaps hovering at high speed, through everything Frigate Orcan could throw at him. Every shot deflected by a shimmering forcefield.

"Wait..." Eggman noted an important detail. "Where are the rest of them?"

"Get ready!" Rock called out as he closed in on the flying weapons platform, right as all of the guns paused in their barrage to reload. "NOW!"

Sonic and Tails darted out from behind his protected form, their bodies shimmering with the power of the wisps as they each triggered the power loaned to them for this assault.

"BURST!" Sonic turned into a red form surrounded by flames and shot forward at the left weapons battery.

"LASER!" Tails turned into a living beam of energy that lanced through the right weapons battery.

Explosions rocked the craft as a large number of its weapons fell off from the twin attack and it began listing to one side.

"How do ya like that!" Sonic grinned as he, Tails, and the red and cyan wisps fell back into formation beside Rock, Yacker and the other wisps in their group emerging from behind the robot.

Frigate Orcan responded by climbing higher above the glowing pathway, well outside of jumping range for the three below.

"Hey!" Tails yelled. "Get back here and–Incoming!"

The bottom of the weapons platform had opened up, releasing a deluge of bombs and spiked balls down upon them.

"Orange!" Rock called out as he used the Green Hover's forcefield to power through the assault.

"Rot nud pe zis!" the orange wisp declared as it merged with Rock, the green wisp leaving his body and his armor turning from green to

orange.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: ORANGE ROCKET

"Keew rung!" the green wisp called out as Rock began charging the new weapon and dodging the last few bombardments.

"ROCKET!" he yelled, releasing the energy from the bottom of his feet and shooting upwards in a plume of orange energy.

"Look!" Tails grinned. "Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane!"

"As if," Sonic grinned back as Rock shot straight through Frigate Orcan and right out the top. "That's the *man* ."

"Eggman!" Knuckles yelled as he and Blues caught up with the man again. "What are you up to? Why does this place look and feel like Angel Island?"

"Very astute, Knuckles," Eggman chuckled. "This is indeed Angel Island!"

"But..." Blues frowned as Silver and Quint arrived. "It was daytime on Angel Island, and now it's nighttime... You transported us halfway across the planet, but nothing else... How can this still be Angel Island?"

"Eggman!" Silver shouted. "You need to return that camera! It doesn't belong in this time!"

"We know you had to have gotten it from Nega!" Quint added. "Tell us where he is!"

"I see both of you have questions for me... Well, then, I suppose if either of you manage to defeat my Metal Sonic and his girlfriend in a race, I'll answer them!"

"Metal Sonic's... girlfriend?" Silver asked in confusion, not spotting the looks of fearful surprise on Knuckles and Blues's faces.

"Of a sort," the mechanical voice declared as the robotic hedgehog landed. Followed by a form no one had expected to see again (at least this Loop).

"Is that..." Quint took a step back in surprise, "...the legendary mad robot Waltz?" (17)

"Yes and no," Eggman admitted. "I managed to rebuild her body from data stored in Metal Sonic's archives, but her mind was very thoroughly destroyed."

"I now see that she was the fortunate one," Metal Sonic added. "Death would be preferable to this existence of forced servitude and repeated loss..."

"And this lump has been all sorts of brooding over the whole matter," the mad scientist humphed. "But he is in control of the Waltz frame. It's like two Metals for the price of one!"

"As you say..." Metal Sonic intoned before turning both his head and the puppet-Waltz's to the heroes. "We shall race, and I shall crush you."

"Bring it!" Silver declared.

"Just a reminder: Please refrain from pushing buttons on the starship," the P.A. system announced as Tails finished fiddling with the generator on the flagship. "Occasionally, one might jettison you into space. If this happens, your next of kin will be billed for the replacement hatch."

"Good thing I'm not pressing a button then," Tails smirked, dusting his hands off.

"So, he's using these generators to hold your planets in place with tractor beams?" Rock asked the wisps as the generator shut down, the glowing energy chain turning translucent as power stopped being fed to it.

"Yos!" Yacker confirmed. "Zo Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail saxaid zaxat zoupp'd gour paxaltii ox welkick axas reck axas ovon eno waxas axandivo duo te zo... zo..."

"Zo cilcuit," the yellow wisp supplied.

"Yoaxah, zo cilcuit!" Yacker nodded

"Proaxaso, whorp us bloo zo loch eb eep flothlon!" the green wisp pleaded.

"Act chep Faxardupp Jesohaxail!" the orange wisp added.

"We will," Rock promised. "Where to next?"

"Praxanot Wisp!"

"Hooohoho!" Eggman laughed despite his war machine being leveled. "Even with the blue menaces interfering, I'll soon have enough alien energy to power my mind control ray to take over the whole planet, making it the center of my Eggmanland theme park!"

"Y'all reckon you'll be able ta get enough energy to take over the whole dang planet?" Cubot asked curiously.

"I 'reckon' I will," Eggman sneered as he mimicked his minion's current cowboy accent. "Where's your new voice chip?"

"Right here boss!" Orbot zoomed in, holding the chip up. "Just need to install it!" Orbot hopped over to Cubot and began singing while fiddling around. "Oh, the think bone's connected to the talk bone..."

"Finally," Eggman grumbled as Orbot finished up. "I doubt anything could be as annoying as that cowboy chatter..."

"Yarr!" Cubot growled out, startling Eggman out of his chair. "Feeling ship-shape with me new voice chip I am! Ah, beggin' yer pardon squire but me and me matey are goin' ta sail of in search of those lubbers Mega Man and Sonic! Ahrr!" (18)

And with a quick salute, Cubot zoomed out.

"I think that's the wrong chip," Orbot observed intelligently.

"Really?" Eggman sneered. "Are you sure he doesn't normally speak in pirate? Whatever. If he wants to go after those blue headaches, then go help him. Take the Big Chaser and try not to screw things up."

"Um... you want me to fight Mega Man and Sonic?" Orbot couldn't gulp, but he was doing a decent impression.

"Did I stutter?" Eggman glared, prompting his minion to beat a hasty exit. "And fix that chip while you're at it!"

"Next stop: Planet Wisp," the transport announced as it closed in on the lush natural mini-planet, its natural beauty at odds with pretty much everything the heroes knew about Eggman and his preferences. "This attraction is currently off-limits, as it is still under construction and may not be dangerous enough for visitors yet."

"Zaxat nud eep whemo ug fig kaxassupp... zick!" the red wisp shook one of its tendrils angrily. "Wo peniz waxank dit te fo daxackoleus!"

"You know," Rock pondered aloud, "with Eggman's obsession with making things way more dangerous than necessary, I'm honestly surprised he hasn't done himself in by now."

"Bro," Sonic chuckled as he shook his head, "we may be lucky, but no one's *that* lucky."

" *This* is the legendary mad robot Waltz?" Quint asked in confusion as a burst of shots pinged off of Sakugarne.

"No," Blues replied as he blocked a similar burst with his shield. "The attacks are too focused. Too precise. As ruthless as the intent is, there are actually pauses between shot bursts to retarget and recalculate attack angles."

There was some loud swearing from Knuckles as he caromed off of Metal Sonic's Black Shield nearby and crashed into Silver, the robot hedgehog taking the chance to gain a lead in the cutthroat race.

"This is Metal Sonic using Waltz's abilities," Blues continued as he kept his shield up between himself and the Waltz puppet, determined to win Eggman's one-sided wager, "not the insane berserker that blasted at anything and everything without care for collateral damage."

"Ah," Yacker seemed to inhale the fresh natural breeze as he floated out of the transport, "whemo swook..." the white wisp with the spitcurl stopped as he took a look around and saw the heavy construction a short ways past the green fields with the ominous red and gray metal jutting out of the pristine nature belching smoke into the mini-planet's blue sky.

"Haxat whaxas Faxardupp Jesohaxail peno te eep whemo?!" the cyan wisp wailed as general exclamations of disbelief echoed from the other wisps.

"Dang..." Rock took in the sight and listened to the metallic sounds of construction going on in the distance. "It looks like Eggman's trying to roboticize the planet. The slow way."

"Yeah, that–" Sonic was cut off as the P.A. system at the landing spot suddenly flared to life.

"Attention guests: if you can hear this message, you are trespassing in an area still under renovation. If you are not an Eggman robot please return to the main park areas and ignore anything evil you might have seen here. Thank you."

"Yeah, that's not happening," Sonic huffed and crossed his arms. "Honestly, the whole theme of galactic conquest and subjugation of all life just isn't all that amusing to me."

"Yeah," Rock nodded. "I think we should lobby for a theme change to questing heroes beating up the evil minions of 'Baldy McNosehair' and freeing those he's oppressed."

"Hehe..." Tails chuckled. "I second! All in fav–"

"Somedisplacementofindigineousaliensanddestructionofnaturalresourcesmayoccur," the P.A. system added in a rush. "Eggmanenterprisesnotresponsible."

"Nnngg..." Rock groaned. "And once again the only time Eggman refuses to claim responsibility is when someone wants to hold him for it."

"You say that like it's surprising," Tails deadpanned.

"Flaxavo enos," Yacker spoke up from where he and the other wisps had been conversing, "wo joow te soot uk eep flothlon pi soo dib zoupp axalo axarlidd. Pum plaxaupp ug wirr bict mindelupp axagaxainch Faxardupp Jesohaxail pi bloo eep praxanot."

"Don't worry," Rock smiled and shot the wisps a thumbs-up. "Go see to your people. We'll take care of Eggman and his 'renovations'."

"Wo'rr fo faxang te whorp ug!" Yacker promised as the small group of former Color Masters sped off.

"Okay," Rock turned towards the construction area and the massive tower that held the chain-like tractor beam at its center, "let's start stopping."

A quartet of teleportation beams resolved themselves about halfway up the space elevator to Wily World. The robot support units; the green cat Tango, the red dog Rush, the blue bird Beat, and the red walking suitcase Eddie; looked at each other and nodded. Their behavior programming was set aside for the moment to fulfill a more important objective. (19)

Fulfilling their rescue mission.

"Hey, a pink wisp!" Sonic grinned as the alien merged with him before turning to his companions. "Sorry, bro, looks like Tails and me are taking the high road! SPIKES!"

And with that, Sonic jumped, turned into a pink ball of spikes and spin-dashed up the construction wall before anyone could respond.

"Hey! Wait for me!" Tails yelled as he zoomed upwards after his friend.

"I'd say that lack of impulse control is going to get you in trouble one of these days," Rock said to the empty air, "but I'm pretty sure you like it that way."

"Tch..." Quint scoffed as he readied himself among the blinding snow of the island's frozen mountain. He and Silver had split from Knuckles and Blues, only for Metal Sonic and his puppet Waltz frame to follow the two of them instead. "I honestly expected better from the infamous 'Metal Sonic'."

"And yet here you are, cowering before me," both bodies replied in identical monotones. "Ready to perish as is natural for all living

things."

"Yeah, right!" Silver sneered. "Even at your best you've barely scratched us!"

"My 'best' you say?" the robot hedgehog asked. "For that pretender who thinks himself my master? I would do no such thing..."

Silver and Quint both blinked at the claim.

"But perhaps it is time I stopped playing by the childish rules his overfed ego has set and dispatch you to the eternal rest that is natural for all who claim life," Metal Sonic intoned. "To return you to the nothingness from which all minds originally came. Be glad. Your eternal peace is at hand, while mine is still far off. My love would have wanted it this wa–"

A sound of air being cut was all the warning Metal Sonic got before a whirling ball with a spinning metal blade protruding from it tried to bisect him, only to get just his arm as he dodged at the last moment. The spinning ball landed and uncurled into the form of Antoine D'Coolette, skidding to a halt in the snow in a swordsman's ready stance, his sword held firmly.

"You dare?" Metal Sonic turned to glare at the newcomer even as the puppet Waltz aimed her ten finger cannons at him

"Oui," the coyote smirked. "We dare indeed."

"...We?" Metal Sonic inquired before a laser blast tore a hole in the puppet Waltz's torso, causing a critical system failure and leaving her a collapsed heap in the snow.

"Yeah, Metah 'hog," Bunnie grinned as she blew smoke from her cybernetic arm cannon. "We."

Metal Sonic looked around and assessed the situation. "This is not over," he declared before igniting his booster rockets and taking to

the air in a tactical retreat.

"Okay Eggman!" Knuckles demanded as he waved his fist in the mad doctor's face. "We won your stupid little race so you're going to answer our questions! Starting with WHY YOU LEFT A CARDBOARD CUTOUT OF YOURSELF HERE YOU COWARD!"

Blues kept a neutral expression as he watched his echidna friend pound, mash, twist, bludgeon, and savage the poor piece of unfortunately shaped cardboard into a decimated mess.

"Feel better?"

"Not really, I..." Knuckles paused as it registered that it hadn't been Blues to say that. He turned to see Shadow with a camera. Right in time for the flashbulb to go off.

"An impressive amount of brute force," Omega observed, "however such violence would be better spent against Eggman himself."

"YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT?!" Knuckles roared.

"Perhaps," Shadow chuckled as he snapped a few more shots. "And perhaps we should race to see who gets first crack."

"YOU'RE ON!"

Rock became alert as he heard commotion up ahead.

"Pint Wemaxan nud pewn!"

"Whorp! Whorp!"

"Saxavo us!"

Muffled explosions followed and Rock increased his pace, coming upon an opening in the structure overlooking a battlefield. There

were numerous Eggman robots strewn about, their armor shredded like they'd fallen afoul of some aggressive spike trap. There were many more firing on a barricade made of shimmering blue cubes behind which cowered a large number of wisps, a figure he recognized as the blocky Blue Man from before and a feminine pink (well, more purplish through the translucent blue cubes, but the shading suggested the figure was actually pink) figure clutching her shoulder.

Wasting no time, Rock jumped down, firing a charged shot from his Mega Buster and following it up with a barrage of normal buster fire as he ducked and wove through the melee.

Eggman's robots immediately dissolved into confusion from the sudden assault from another front and tried to fire on Mega Man, only for his dodging to cause them to hit each other as often as not. In short order, he'd arrived at the barricade.

"It's me Blue Man!" He called out. "I'm here to help!"

"CUBE!" came the response and the wall shifted to a more stepped arrangement allowing Rock to scale it with a few jumps and drop down on the other side. With another cry of "CUBE!" the wall returned to its previous configuration.

"Je Pint Wemaxan! Ug'lo whult!" several wisps gibbered as the pink figure, a lanky female robot with long spikey hair all down her back and spike-tipped feet and hands. "Ug caxaniz bidd riko zaxat!"

Or rather, Rock noted as the robot tried to brush off the wisps' concern, *one* spike-tipped hand. The other arm had apparently been blown off at the shoulder. (20)

"SPI–" Pink Woman's attempt to get back into the fray was cut off as her severed shoulder sparked wildly and she convulsed. Rock darted forward and caught her as she fell.

"It's okay," he assured the robot, "you did good. I can take it from here."

Pink Woman looked him in the eye and after a moment her form faded to a generic unpainted female model, still missing an arm. A pink wisp with a fierce expression in its one eye and five spiked protrusions from its head floated up level with Rock's face.

"Je, *wo* caxan taxako dit blem wholo!" the wisp insisted before shooting into Rock's body, turning his armor bright pink.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: PINK SPIKES

Rock blinked and examined himself. "SPIKES!" he declared, causing several such items to sprout from his hands and feet. *'Hmm... I think this can be charged too for a ranged attack. Interesting...'*

"Caxan ug whorp us, flaxavo eno?" several wisps asked, staring at Rock pleadingly.

"Of course I will," he promised before turning to Blue Man. "Can you follow my lead?" Getting a nod, Rock began charging the Pink Spikes weapon and turned to the regrouping Eggman robots. "Then get ready to drop the barrier in 3... 2... 1..."

"CUBE!" Blue Man shouted as the blue blocks making up the barrier vanished.

"SPIKES!" Rock yelled as he shot a pink orb covered with energy spikes straight ahead before charging in.

"Please note:" the P.A. system announced as Sonic and Tails ground across a series of rails connecting the highest levels of the construction area together. "Any mutant powers gained from riding the attractions here at the park are the express property of Eggman Industry, and must be used in the service of Eggman and his schemes."

"Yeah, I'm not following that," Tails shook his head, chuckling.

"No kidding," Sonic closed his eyes dramatically as he flipped around backwards on the rail. "I'd take my mutant powers and run them all over Eggman's intellectual propert–oop!"

"Sonic!" Tails yelled as, due to not paying attention, Sonic had missed the rail abruptly stopping in mid-air and was flung out into the open air way high above the ground. Jumping off his own rail, Tails took flight and made to turn around and try to grab Sonic before he fell too fa–

"EAGLE!" heralded a crimson blur shooting for Sonic and grabbing him before Tails finished reorienting himself.

"Hey!" Sonic grinned up at the robot who had snagged him out of the air. He was full crimson with an aerodynamic design and a pair of glowing crimson energy wings keeping him aloft. "Thanks for the save!"

"EAGLE!" the Crimson Man replied.

"Hey Sonic!" Tails called, pointing to an area below them where regular explosions and weapon fire was taking place.

"Well, it looks like someone started a party without us!" Sonic grinned before turning to Crimson Man and pointing to the ruckus below. "Hey, buddy, think you can drop us off there? Looks like we've got a few of Baldy McNosehair's bots to smash!"

"EAGLE!" the Crimson Man nodded before zooming in that general direction.

"Okay, Blue Man," Rock called out as he readied another charged Pink Spike shot against the ever-coming tide of Eggman robots, "on my mark!"

"EAGLE!" the cry came from above, along with a duo of "Incoming!"s.

A crimson blur shot down into Eggman's forces and carved a swath through them even as a pair of spinning balls, one blue the other orangish with two tails trailing, hit the ground and took off through the forces.

"Eleven far, one far, two, ten, and noon high! Mark!" Rock didn't even miss a beat. "SPIKES!"

"CUBE!" came Blue Man's cry as a quartet of cubes appeared at the positions noted in time for the Spin Dashing forms to bounce off in a ricocheting pattern that tore through the ranks even more.

"Good job pink, but I'm gonna need a cyan wisp's laser for this next part. And my friends could probably use some of the yellows' drills."

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Eupp!" the pink wisp yelled to the other wisps hanging back. "Pum joow pit cyaxan pi semo yorrews evol wholo! Quing! Anupp merunkools?"

"Pum'rr pe dit!" a cyan wisp called almost instantly as it zoomed up, trailed by a couple other cyan wisps and a few yellow wisps.

"You're with me," Rock pointed to the cyan wisp and then two yellow wisps, "and you two go help Sonic and Tails. Please."

"Zo spinupp eno pi zo eno eb twe taxairs," the pink wisp clarified.

"Legol!" the yellow wisps saluted before darting off towards Sonic and Tails just coming out of their Spin Dashes, and the cyan wisp merged with him, turning his armor the same rich cyan color.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: CYAN LASER

"Blue Man!" he yelled out. "I need a grid of cubes configured for ninety-degree energy redirection, stat!"

"CUBE!" Blue Man yelled out and focused for a moment before forming such a large array of translucent cubes.

Rock took aim at the nearest one as Sonic and Tails turned into their Yellow Drill forms to tunnel beneath what was about to happen and the winged Crimson Man took to the sky above. "LASER!"

The beam shot forth, hitting the blue cube and refracting at right angles from cube to cube, creating a deadly grid that either destroyed Eggman's robots or left them easy pickings for Sonic and Tails doing subterranean dolphin impressions.

"Well hello little animal friends," Wood Man greeted as he spotted the group and approached. As the primary caretaker of the robotic flora and fauna of Wily World it fell to him to make sure they were all operating well and kept in their proper place. Kneeling before them, he reached out to pet the green cat. "Why are you all the way out here? Say... don't you all belong to Meg–" (21)

"MRRRROOOOOWWWRRRR!"

"ACK! OW! I'M NOT A SCRATCHING POST! HEEELLP!"

"Arr whaxair zo kloaxat whole!" the latest group of freed wisps cheered and bowed to Rock. "Act ug axas worr, flaxavo whorpols!" they bowed to Sonic and Tails before speeding away down the side of the massive incomplete structure at the center of Eggman's construction efforts.

"Nice to see those guys in high spirits," Sonic grinned, "especially after that Blue Man... are you alright Tails?"

"J-j-just f-fine..." Tails fought back the sudden fit of giggles he'd gotten after reading his device. "W-what were you *snrk* saying?"

"I was saying it's a shame that Blue Man guy took off to look for Yacker and the others. We could probably use his help coming up. Eh... at least the pink wisp and the Crimson Man guy stuck with us, right guys?"

"Pum weurdniz vipt zis bel axanythick!" the pink wisp declared even as Crimson Man landed right before the group with a cry of "EAGLE!" and pointed towards the depressed center of the construct.

"Yep," Sonic looked down into the distance and spotted the glow of the generator. "That looks like our target alright."

A deep rumble punctuated by some sharp lurching of the structure caused Sonic to stumble back. A few moments later and what looked like a giant over-mechanized teacup ride ringed with a thick circular barrier wall and with blast shields in the center hovering on powerful jet rockets rose up before them.

"And that looks like our dance partner!" Sonic grinned as the blast shield opened into a parody of bladed flower petals, revealing a madly grinning robot face in the center. It jerked back and parts of the structure detached to reveal themselves as the robot's arms which swung themselves around just like the demented ferris wheel robot from before.

"EAGLE!"

"Please remember," the P.A. system piped up as Crimson Man tried to shoot forward in a piercing dash at the robot's face, only for the blast shields to close almost instantly, causing the color master to bounce off and hit the structure roof hard next to the others, "all planets in Eggmanland are, as far as you know, wholly owned properties of Eggman Enterprises and its subsidiaries. All

unauthorized photography, video reproduction, or shutting down of generators is strictly prohibited. Thank you."

"You want to say it, bro," Sonic asked, "or should I?"

"I got it," Rock shot Sonic a quick grin before shouting at the top of his robotic speakers. "EGGMAN! WE *ARE* GOING TO SAVE THESE PLANETS, AND WE *ARE* GOING TO FREE THE WISPS! NO GROSS MISUSE OF COPYRIGHT LAW IN THE UNIVERSE IS GOING TO STOP US!" (22)

The teacup ride mech gave a screech as Crimson Man took to the air and the trio of heroes jumped into the mech's outer ring.

"We got this!" Tails yelled as the pink wisp merged with him. "SPIKES!"

The resulting pink spiked ball with twin pink tails Spin Dashed around the edge of the ring while Sonic began hopping between the teacups and Rock pelted the robot's face with buster fire, forcing it to close its blast shields to prevent damage. And then twelve laser cannons around the edge of the blast shields powered up and began firing, forcing Rock and Sonic to take cover as Tails began latching onto the whirling teacups orbiting the central robot head in preparation for his chance.

That chance came when the laser assault ended and the blast shields opened, leaving the robot's head open to Tails's spike form's slingshot attack off ot the closest teacup, tearing a great gouge in the faceplate and sending the robot reeling.

"EAGLE!" Crimson Man sought to take advantage of the opening, but the controlling robot reflexively closed its blast shields, causing Crimson Man to carom off. In the next moment, the robot had detached one of its arms from the outer ring and shot it forward through the mech structure at Crimson Man's general location, narrowly missing the color master.

The lasers started up again, forcing the trio of heroes and pink wisp inside the ring to take cover behind the teacups.

"Kloaxat whole! Kloaxat whole!" the cry came as a panicking blue wisp shot into the safe zone. "Dit nud tollifro! Faxardupp Jesohaxail nud voaxan lefets teet Yaxangol pi zo ethols! Pum sliow te chep zom, fut zoupp pochleyow zo fedupp zaxat zo Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail kaxavo vo pi–"

"Sonic! Rock!" Tails pointed at the teacups which were glowing ominously. "It's about to blow the teacups!"

"Eh je!" the blue wisp yelped before diving into Rock's body, turning all of his armor the same shade of blue he was known for.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: BLUE CUBE

"CUBE!" Rock yelled, forming a six-sided energy barrier around the four of them.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!

Rock let out a sigh of relief as the impromptu barrier held firm before taking stock of the situation. The mech's frame was a bit scorched, but otherwise functional. Same for the closed blast shields around the most vulnerable part of the robot and...

vreeennn...

...the laser turrets it was even now firing. To little avail as Rock kept the barrier up.

"Options?" he asked as he scanned for Crimson Man. The color master was hanging back, apparently hesitant to try another assault after the lack of success the first few times.

"I've still got some Hyper-Go-On left over from rescuing wisps earlier," Sonic said. "When he stops shooting, I'll use it to boost

above him and wham!" the hedgehog slammed his fist into his palm.

"Worth a shot," Rock nodded as the laser beams shut off and he dropped the barrier. "Go!"

Sonic vanished in a burst of speed, tearing around the outer ring in an aura of white energy like gravity didn't concern him and upon reaching the topmost point, he launched himself straight downwards in a homing attack directly for the robot's face...

...and slammed into the quickly closed blast shields, bouncing off at an angle and dealing no real harm to the machine.

"CUBE!" Rock yelled, creating a series of four cubes around the central unit. Sonic landed on the rightmost one and pushed off towards the lower one, jumped to the leftmost, rebounded to the upper cube, and was ready when the robot opened its protection once more.

"Surprise!" he called out, slamming a new homing attack home before the machine could react to the assault, sending the robot reeling with a mechanical screech.

The robot flailed around in the flying mech it was attached to for a moment before sending out an energy surge that caught all three heroes and forced the blue wisp to pop out of Rock's body.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

The cubical blue wisp dazedly collided with the pink wisp, sending both reeling as the mech began to spin and reorient itself horizontally. Around and around it went, the speed increased by the rocket boosters keeping it aloft until the whole thing was a circular metal blur. (23)

"Oh, geez," Sonic moaned as the energy surge abated and he was assaulted by the unwanted centrifugal force, "I think I'm gonna huuuuurrrrrllll!" His sudden nausea wasn't helped by being suddenly

flung loose from Eggman's teapot mech and he instinctively curled into a spiny ball as he flew, barely noting the crimson color as he impacted with something. The impact and his disorientation was enough to knock him loose from his curled-up mode and he began free-falling through the air.

"I g*urp*ot you!" the familiar voice of Tails announced as the flying fox grabbed Sonic out of the air and pulled up.

"Easy buddy," Sonic grinned sickly. "I'm already about to toss my chili dogs..."

"I know..." Tails replied as he wobbly sought a landing area more stable than he felt at the moment. "I feel almost as bad as after trying that 'Bucket o' Sushi' pla–"

"Not helping the nausea lil bro..."

While the two mobians sought stable ground, the two wisps tumbled head over tendrils in different directions before they managed to orient themselves and Rock...

Rock had managed to hold on just a bit longer than the others before he too was sent flying. In almost the opposite direction as Sonic and Tails.

'Okay, this is... pretty bad,' Rock thought to himself. *'At this speed I'm pretty much done for if I hit anything...'* his thoughts trailed off as he spotted a crimson form shooting towards him. It had three determined eyes on a head swept back in a tri-pronged shape that evoked a bird of prey and a trio of tendrils that looked a bit like large feathers. A crimson wisp.

"Pum axaperegizo, kloaxat whole," the wisp gibbered solemnly as it flew up beside Rock, "bel foick unaxafro te pe velo." With that, the crimson wisp merged with the blue bomber, turning his armor a deep crimson color.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: CRIMSON EAGLE

"Okay," Rock grinned as he assessed the weapon's capabilities, "I can work with this. EAGLE!" The Mega Man sprouted a pair of glowing crimson energy wings and shot upwards, high, high above the crazed teacup ride mech that was only now slowing its deadly spin, seeing how it had ended up moving itself out into the open air instead of over the high roof. "Alright now," he spoke to the crimson wisp he was merged with as he finished analyzing the Crimson Eagle's capabilities, "I've got a plan, but I'm going to need you to disengage and follow me down. Be ready to merge with me again when I give the signal. This is going to be close. Got it?"

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Pum uctolchaxact, kloaxat whole," the crimson wisp stated as gravity realized that Rock was no longer defying it and began pulling him into a freefall.

"Any chance you could stop with the 'great hero' thing?" Rock asked idly as he charged up his Mega Buster and fired on the teacup robot, noting that it closed its blast shields in plenty of time as he charged up again. "My name is Rock," he fired again and began charging another shot. "Or Mega Man if you really want to be formal."

"Zaxant ug bel torrick vo yeep naxamo, kloaxat whole," the crimson wisp stated as Eggman's robot opened its blast shields only to close them again to block the second shot even as Rock fired the third and began charging a fourth, "fut Pum wirr jovol ponupp haxat ug axalo te us wisps. Jet axabtol axarr ug whaxavo peno."

"It's just..." Rock blushed a bit as he fired again and began charging the next shot, noting that the mech wasn't bothering to open its blast shields this time. "It's kind of embarrassing being praised like that..."

"Zon chep peick wholeic poods," the crimson wisp countered as the next shot was unleashed and the mech started growing larger in their view. "Chep foick pit 'Vogaxa Vaxan'."

"And let people like 'Baldy McNosehair' have their way?" Rock chuckled back as he fired one last shot. "Never. It's time."

"Act zaxat dis hupp ug axalo pit kloaxat whole," the crimson wisp concluded as it merged with Rock again, once more turning his armor a pure deep crimson.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: CRIMSON EAGLE

"I suppose I can't argue with that..." Rock sighed as he began charging energy while continuing his freefall and noting the point where another of his charged shots would have impacted if he'd kept up the barrage. *'Come on... Start wondering why I stopped shooting and open your blast shields...'*

A moment later, and the barest fractions of a second before impact, Eggman's creation did exactly that.

"EAGLE!" Rock yelled out as he was covered in a crimson aura of Hyper-Go-On energy and accelerated even faster than terminal velocity, punching straight through the robot's faceplate and out the back hurtling towards the ground. He barely pulled up into a horizontal flight path as he heard the crashing sound of the teacup mech falling and apparently hitting about every level of construction on the way down. He came to a stop near the generator and landed even as a few stray parts of his former foe bounced to a halt and the crimson wisp exited his body again.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

A few seconds later and the sound of Tails coming in for a landing was heard.

"Oh, man, that was awesome!" Sonic pumped his fist in the air as he landed, before wobbling slightly on his feet. "Just... make the planet stop spinning... *urp*"

"Yeah, how are you holding up Rock?" Tails asked as he landed a little harder than normal.

"Better than I probably would have before my gyro stabilizers were upgraded from the schematics scanned from Top Man," Rock grinned as he spotted the blue and pink wisps approaching from wherever they'd been flung. "Now, let's get this generator shut down."

"Hurry it up Shade!" Charmy fidgeted. "We need to stop Eggman's plan before he does... whatever it is he's gonna do!"

Shade bit back her retort, knowing it wasn't going to do any good as she continued working with the wires inside the panel she'd accessed.

"Calm d-down Charmy..." Ray placated. "Sh-shade kn-nows what she's doin-ng. R-right?"

"She is a professional," the green figure of the rogue Sniper Joe agreed.

"Arr whaxair zo kloaxat whole pi whis flaxavo whorpols!" a crowd of wisps that had gathered cheered as the generator shut down and the chain-like tractor beam powered down to a barely active state.

"Okay, seriously Tails," Sonic sighed as his friend began snickering wildly again upon reading his translator, "what's the big joke?"

"N-n-noth-thing..." Tails chortled for a moment. "Th-the wisps are j-just...*snrk-k-k* saying h-how thankful *sprrrrt* they are to Mega Man and his *ch-ch-ch* *two* sidekicks! Hahahahahahaha!"

"W-what?!" Sonic began sputtering. "Sidekick?! *Me?!* "

"W-what?" Tails barely managed to fight back his laughter. "You're not *snrk* happy that your 'big bro' is a, heh, big hero?"

"No, no, it's good," Sonic said hastily as Rock began conversing with the blue wisp about something. "Great even."

"Zo Vogaxa Vaxan wirr saxavo zom!"

"Yoaxah, zo kloaxat whole caxaniz reso!"

"Who'rr sked Faxardupp Jesohaxail pi whis lefets haxat-bel!"

Sonic slumped dejectedly as praise he couldn't even understand was heaped upon an increasingly embarrassed Rock. "Awesome. Outstanding. Amazing."

"Hmm..." the form of Eggman frowned as the man stared through a pair of binoculars down the icy mountain slopes at the approaching groups. "Those pests are proving even more troublesome than I'd predicted... But no matter. With my improvements to the Egg Lynxes, there's nothing they can do to stop me! Ohohohohoho!"

"Next stop: the Tropical Resort. There, you'll find breathtaking views from our giant Ferris Wheel, amazing views from the shopping mall, and constant risk of bodily harm."

"Wait, run that by me again?" Sonic asked as the transport whipped from Planet Wisp back to the Tropical Resort.

"A kiaxank wrirrick lefet teet Yaxangol pi zo ethols!" the blue wisp explained to nods from the pink and crimson wisps that had joined the group. "Dit whoaxadow chlaxaidd bel zo zick wherdick eep praxanots din praxaco! Dit nud keick te pe faxad zicks te zom, riko vaxako zom dinke jogaxa-wisps el welso!"

"In a language I can understand, please?"

"It's fine," Rock patted the dejected-looking blue wisp. "Tails and I know what you said."

"Yeah," Tails agreed before turning to his device and reading aloud for Sonic's benefit. "He said that Yacker and the other wisps, the ones who were powering the color masters we've met and possibly others, were captured by a giant drilling robot which then took off for the Tropical Resort. Likely to transport them wherever captured wisps are taken."

"So that's why we're going there first instead of to the Aquarium Park?" Sonic clarified, getting nods. "Cool. I'm always up for trashing more of Baldy McNosehair's toys."

"Just you wait Eggman!" Knuckles growled as he tore up the frozen mountainside, Blues right behind him. "I'm gonna tear you a new one when I catch you!"

"Not if we get to him first!" Shadow challenged as he and Omega blasted their own way up the mountain.

"The foliage you see was pilfered from various environmentally fragile planets. Please enjoy them, as they are the last of their kind."

Rock and the others ignored the P.A. system as they tore through the central resort area, looking for anything that looked like it might be a giant drill robot.

"Holo ceurd zoupp fo?!" the blue wisp worried.

"I don't know, but–"

THOOM

Rock's reply was cut off as the ground shook, sending himself and Sonic stumbling as they lost their footing.

"Call me crazy," Sonic jerked his thumb in the general direction of where the sound came from, "but I think checking that out is a good place to start."

"Ekaxaupp, ug'lo claxazupp," the pink wisp replied as the group took off in that direction. "Fut dit nud chirr pit keew didoaxa!"

"Please feel free to leave all valuables in your vehicle during your stay here at Eggmanland," the P.A. system advised as they all ran, "as they will be perfectly safe. In no way will roaming bands of robots break into your vehicle."

"Ug axalo sust pit riaxal," the crimson wisp rolled its eyes as they all began to hear sounds of a struggle.

"QUAKE!"

"Jump!" Rock yelled as he took his own advice none too soon.

THOOM

Landing, he and Sonic continued rushing for the commotion, right behind the flying wisps and Tails. In an open area between shops, they saw a large industrial-type robot with two arms each ending in a giant drill. Facing off against it were two robots. In the middle of a shallow crater formed from a heavy impact was a gray robot with armor comprised of ninety and one-thirty five degree angles instead of curved plating that looked like someone had taken the general design of Stone Man or Guts Man and added breasts. The other was a rotund indigo robot with comparatively short limbs that reminded Rock of Mash, except with more articulate appendages.

"ASTEROID!"

As they took in the sight, the Indigo Man emitted a ring-shaped gravity field around itself that ripped apart a nearby storefront to create a ring of debris around him oriented vertically like a wheel and

charged the drill robot, picking up more loose debris for his ring as he went.

It almost sounded like the drill robot replied with something, but if it did, that reply was drowned out by the loud whirring of the drill that shot forward to meet the charging Indigo Man. Drill met debris ring and both ground against each other hard, and then the drill began to buckle and finally broke apart to be added to the ring of debris.

And the second drill swiped in from the side, catching Indigo Man from an unprotected angle to punch straight through in a spray of metal and other detritus that flew in the direction of Rock and the others, forcing them to brace themselves.

"Kot whix!" the pink wisp shot for Sonic as a large round one-eyed wisp with short tendrils and a decorative ring around its body bounced to a halt at Rock's feet.

"Chliko sluo vupp bliocts!" the crimson wisp similarly shot for Tails.

"SPIKES!" Sonic wasted no time revving up a pink wisp-enhanced Spin Dash while Tails took to the air as a winged crimson fox-head trailing two tails with a cry of "EAGLE!"

Sonic's attack missed as the 'Drillinator' took to the air and Tails's attempt at a charging attack resulted in him almost getting swatted out of the sky by the remaining drill-arm.

"Daxaln dit! Pum..." the indigo wisp shook off its disorientation and spotted Rock, its eye widening in amazement. "Alo ug zo kloaxat whole Pum whoaxald axafuk? Zo Vogaxa Vaxan?"

"Um... yeah?" Rock confirmed.

"Zon proaxaso! Ug kettaxa saxavo vupp bliocts blem zeso twe!"

"Those t–" Rock's puzzlement was cut off as the indigo wisp merged with him, turning his armor a bold indigo all over.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: INDIGO ASTEROID

Rock analyzed the weapon as the Gray Woman moved to intercept, managing to grab the remaining drill arm while it was inactive and holding it in place. 'Looks like the basic principle is similar to Junk Man's weapon, only using gravity manipulation to form a shield of debris instead of electromagnetism... Let's see... if I tweak it just right... got it.'

"ASTEROID!" he yelled, charging forward and activating two planar fields of gravity instead of just one. Each planar field sucked up debris from the surrounding area, most of which the Indigo Man mad pulled up before, to form a pair of diagonally oriented swirling rings around Rock, crossing each other directly ahead and directly behind.

The 'Drillinator' tried to move out of the way, but a pair of Homing Attacks from Sonic and Tails kept it in place for a direct impact. The crossing rings of gravity-held debris ground into the industrial armor of the large robot for several long moments before it finally caved and broke apart. As it did so, a large purple object burst out of the shell and settled in to hover a short distance away.

The new thing looked like a huge thickly armored purple cylinder hovering on its side with spiked white hemispheres on either end and a yellow attachment that unfolded into six relatively short legs and a pair of robotic eyestalks. Overall, the whole thing looked like a massive 'hermit crabmeat'.

"Avast ye lubbers!" a voice broadcast from the thing. "Stand fast and lay down yer weapons 'less ye wanna sleep in Davy Jones's locker!"

"Oh, indeed," a more cultured voice added. "Everything would go so much smoother if you surrendered. Why, we might even meet the boss's quota."

"Is that..." Sonic arched an eyebrow. "Is it just me, or is that thing being piloted by Orbot and Cubot?"

"Certainly sounds like it," Tails agreed.

"Ug kivo eep bliocts faxang!" the pink wisp demanded as it zipped up to the robot's face.

"Y-yoaxah!" the blue wisp added. "Proaxaso?"

"Yar-har! Just like that!" Cubot's voice laughed right before the space between the mechanical crab legs began sucking in air, and both wisps with it. "Two more lil' aliens fer Admiral Eggboss!"

"JE!" the crimson wisp cried out in horror.

Sonic, Tails, and Rock gaped at what just happened. Rock's shock was great enough that the Indigo Asteroid power fizzled out, dropping the gathered debris in a haphazard pile. The shock quickly gave way to anger, but another was already acting.

"QUAKE!" the Gray Woman leaped at the heavily armored robot, fist outstretched. As she approached, the spiked hemispheres at each end of the robot detached and sprang out on the ends of articulated arms before slamming together on either side of the color master.

"Goodness!" Orbot's voice seemed surprised. "That actually worked!" (24)

"Of course it did, matey!" Cubot declared as three spots atop the robot began glowing before firing lasers. Rock, Sonic, and Tails dodged two of them, but the third and center laser carved what remained of the Gray Woman straight up the middle, an angular hexagonal-headed wisp with three eyes fell out as the body was reduced to dull scrap. "And here be another lil' alien!"

"No!" Rock growled as he jumped forward and grabbed the gray wisp even as he suction resumed. Twisting his indigo-colored body around, he hit the opening back first and plugged the suction mechanism. "Let's see how you guys like–"

The suction suddenly reversed energetically enough that Rock was spat into the ground with enough force to dislodge the indigo wisp.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Yar! That be a close one!"

"Chep zom," the gray wisp whispered before merging with him, turning his armor a pure stormy gray.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: GRAY QUAKE

"Sonic! Tails!"

"On it, bro!" Sonic called back as he and Tails Spin Dashed straight for the 'hermit crabmeat' thing and began slamming into its armor as it tried to swat them away.

"Get off ye bilge rats!"

"QUAKE!" Rock yelled as he jumped straight for the larger robot's center of mass.

"Oh dear," Orbot declared right before impact.

THOOM

"Well blow me down!" Cubot yelled as the heavy impact shook the heavily armored robot and blew at least one circuit from the sparks that occurred. The reflexive flailing however managed to catch Rock in the side with one of the spiked fist-things the robot sported, knocking him off and sending him careening across the ground, dislodging the gray wisp as he tumbled.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"I think we may need to make a tactical retreat..." Orbot declared as Sonic and Tails rushed to check on their friend.

"Ahrr! Right ye be!" Cubot agreed as the robot turned around and began speeding off. "Set sail fer the sea planet and seek aid from Cap'n Jelly matey!"

"Don't let them get away!" Rock declared as he forced himself to his feet to give chase.

"Waxait bel us!" the indigo wisp yelled out as it, the crimson wisp, and the gray wisp followed the three heroes.

"Would the owner of a white hovercar shaped like an egg please report to the front desk. Your car has been broken into. Repeat. Would the owner of a white hovercar shaped like an egg please report to the front desk. Your car has been broken in... Wait a minute, WHAT THE HECK?"

As the four pairs stood before a huge ice cave carved out to look like the face of the rotund man hovering before it, provided you tilted your head and squinted just right, Silver reflected that he had a pretty good idea what was really going on (though in the Loops very little was certain, especially regarding familiar events), but he kind of wanted to see Quint puzzle things out. At times it was a bit startling to Silver how close the two were, but then they were the only ones aside from Eggman Nega who were from a couple hundred years in the future.

"It's all starting to make sense..." Quint stared the grinning madman down. "The way Metal Sonic called you a 'pretender', the fact that you have a camera from the future that only Nega could have given you even though he'd never let something like that out of his own sight. You *are* Eggman Nega aren't you?" (25)

" *Nega?!* " Bunnie did a double-take a short distance away, her and her husband's limbs tensing just a bit more than they already were.

"Hehehe..." the madman just laughed secure in his personal craft. "An interesting theory... But I wonder... Do you actually have proof?"

"Grr..." Knuckles growled.

"Enough games doctor!" Shadow accused. "Tell us what you're up to! Now!"

"Yeah!" Knuckles agreed. "How can this be Angel Island when it's on the other side of the planet!"

"I suppose I can tell you that much," the rotund scientist grinned widely. "This is Onyx Island, as your precious Angel Island will be known in the future!"

"I knew it!" Quint clenched his fist and leveled his arm cannon at the man. "Only Eggman Nega has the ability to bring an entire island through time like that!"

"Enough chatter!" their adversary scowled as a pair of... well robots that looked like someone had tried to cross a polar bear and some form of large cat emerged from the cave. "It's time I took care of you all! If I defeat you all now, there will be just that much fewer to get in the way of my plans in the present or the future!"

"That's one heck of a big *if* , Eggman, Nega, or whoever you are!" Blues declared before they all charged forward.

"Next stop: the Aquarium Park. This underwater attraction is the perfect place to commune with sea life, and hopefully, get chummy with the sharks."

"Ugh..." Sonic groused as the transport sped after Orbot and Cubot towards the pure water mini-planet encased in a giant aquarium structure. "More underwater fun... Yay..."

"You *still* haven't learned how to swim?" Rock raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"Hey, I can swim just fine!"

"No," Tails shook his head pointedly, "you can *not sink* just fine. Honestly, Sonic, if it weren't for people like Luffy you'd be the worst swimmer I know." (26)

Sonic grumbled that he managed perfectly well as the three wisps travelling along giggled at his discomfort.

The man known as Eggman fumed and clutched his cards tightly as he watched his precious Egg Lynxes get torn apart by the force arrayed against them. "Why you... I'll–OW! No! My cards!"

A sudden rush, jump, and sword swipe from Antoine had caught him off guard and made him drop the cards he was prepared to taunt the do-gooders with and his mad scrambling only recovered almost all of them.

"I got it!" Silver yelled as he grabbed the loose card out of the air. "It's Princess Sally!"

"Hmph..." Antoine glared at the mad scientist. "I was hopink to recovair zem all..."

"Eggman attempting retreat," Omega informed everyone. "Resuming pursuit and destroy."

"Oh, no you don't!" Quint yelled as he took off after Omega and Shadow. "Nega's ours! Come on Silver!"

"Sorry," Silver apologized as he tossed the card to Bunnie before speeding away himself, "gotta run!"

"Hey! Not so fast!" Knuckles tried to chase as well, only for Blues to hold him back. "What's the big deal?!"

"Let's restore Sally first," Blues asked. "Who knows? Maybe she overheard something important as a card."

"Oh, right..." Knuckles took the card from Bunnie and began to channel a small amount of his personal Chaos Energy. "Let's see... If I remember right, this should–oof!"

"Sally-girl!" Bunnie promptly tackled the restored princess in a grateful hug, ignoring the fact that Knuckles was pinned beneath her.

"GET OFF!" the irate echidna's roar was muffled by the snow he was in.

"I'm glad to see you too Bunnie," Sally smiled as she and Bunnie stood up.

"Excellent," Blues nodded. "Now that we know the cards can be restored safely, did you manage to overhear anything important while you were one?"

"Sorry," Sally shook her head. "I know he was raving about turning the whole planet into his card collection or something a lot, but no details."

"Worth a shot," the red raider shrugged before turning to run off after Eggman, followed shortly by Knuckles.

"Apologies, princess, but we need to be rescuink Amy as well," Antoine bowed.

"Yeah, but it's good to have you back Sal-gal," Bunnie smiled. "Better check in with Rotor and get looked at and we'll see y'all later!"

Sally watched her friends and fellow Freedom Fighters race off with a bemused expression. "NICOLE?"

"Yes, Sally?" the reply from the area of her belt asked.

"Could you send Rotor a message that we're fine and that we'll be joining him after the current mission is over? And then join me in your mobian form? I think the others need a reminder that it takes more than a little inconvenience to put us down."

"Message sent," NICOLE informed her as she built her solid hologram lynx form, dressed in a tight zippered vest and form-fitting shorts combo, along with gloves and boots, identical to what Sally herself wore. Only purple. "And such a desire to join in competition over who saves the world is more like Sonic than your usual habits, Sally. I do believe he's rubbing off on you. Innuendo intended."

Sally blushed heavily. "If I agree with you, will you promise to never repeat that where Sonic can hear it?"

NICOLE tilted her head in a manner she'd learned indicated the mock-thought she was giving the request.

"No." (27)

The man known as Eggman growled as he spotted those blasted 'heroes' making their way through Onyx Island's Junkyard zone through his surveillance devices. If they got too much farther, they could really put his plans in jeopardy! His ultimate creation was nearly finished too!

"Metal Sonic..." he called, the robot hedgehog appearing next to him when summoned, his arm repaired. Or perhaps regenerated. The mad scientist didn't care. "I trust you've analyzed the data you copied from last time."

"I have," the robot intoned.

"You have, what?"

"I have, you pathetic waste of genetic material."

"I see I'm going to have to work on making your personality properly respectful..."

"You may try, inferior fleshsack."

"Whatever. Go and halt the advance of these meddling interlopers."

"..."

"NOW!"

"Are you sure you shouldn't cut the red wire?" Charmy asked as Shade worked on the most recent console of Eggman's device. "I mean, it's always the red wire, isn't it?"

"Not this time," Shade replied curtly, "now let me work and–"

"I know! I'll cut the red wire myself!"

"Charmy, no!"

BZZZZAAAAPPP!

"Sh-Shade! Charm-my!" Ray gasped as the Sniper Joe rushed forwards and hauled them back.

"You okay, Vector?" Espio asked as his friend smoldered a bit from the surprise shock.

"I'm fine... A little singed around the edges, but I'll live."

"Good to hear," Mighty nodded. "For a moment there I didn't need an x-ray to see through you."

"As long as you didn't see any broken bones, I'll be fine," the crocodile detective huffed. "Now come on. We've still got more of these things to disable before we're done."

"The mighty ocean! Cradle of life! Trivialized for your amusement here at Eggmanland!" the P.A. system went ignored as Sonic, Tails, and the indigo and crimson wisps charged after the heavily armored

robot piloted by Orbot and Cubot. A robot that, aside from a dent where Rock had hit it with a direct Quake impact, looked pretty intact.

"Get back here you two!" Sonic yelled as he raced through the eastern-style architecture Eggman seemed to have favored for the buildings that rose up out of the water even as glass tubes reached down into the depths.

"Never, ye lubbers!" Cubot yelled back. "We be takin' this alien booty to the cap'n!"

"Besides," Orbot added as the robot halted a fair ways out into a large stretch of open water, Sonic and Tails skidding to a halt on a lone platform just past the buildings, "unless you can somehow walk on water you can't reach us."

"Don't tempt me," Sonic huffed as he glared at the robot.

"Pospicaxafro cewaxalds!" the crimson wisp spat.

"Kivo us eep bliocts faxang!" the indigo wisp added.

"Yar-har! Me matey's right! Ye lubbers can't touch us!"

"You sure?" the voice of Rock called out loud and clear from atop a tall building near the platform Sonic and Tails had stopped on. Standing on its edge, his gray armored form was hard to mistake. "I think a good tsunami might shake you up!"

With that, Rock jumped off and plummeted towards the platform below even as Sonic joined with the indigo wisp and gave a running jump. "ASTEROID!"

He turned into a yellow-eyed indigo orb with an ornate ring around it that exuded a planar gravity field that sucked up the Eggman robots in the water below to form a ring of debris and began to move in the direction of Eggman's lackeys and their ride.

"Uh... tsu-whatey?" Cubot puzzled.

"Ahh!" Orbot was a little faster on the uptake. "Full retreat! Full retreat!"

"QUAKE!" Rock yelled right before impact.

THOOM

The resulting massive wave of water carried Sonic in his Asteroid form, debris ring and all, straight for the frantically fleeing mech. (28)

"Enjoy the ride," the P.A. system chimed helpfully. "And remember, in case of an emergency, your seat cushion may be used as a floatation device. It won't actually float, but you can use it as one!"

"Whi Foaxald Vaxan!" the white wisp cheered as Dr. Light's face appeared on the screen again.

"Oh, joy," Bass deadpanned. "The peacenik himself."

"Be nice," Roll hissed. "I *already* owe you several whacks when we get out."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"Anyway, what's up dad?"

"It seems there may be a delay in your rescue..."

"Such as...?"

"Well..."

"Get away from me, mutt!" Turbo Man yelled as he tore around another corner, the rubber of his tires squealing sharply, the angry barking of his primary pursuer close behind him. (29)

"Ye cheatin' bilge rats!" Cubot raged as he made the Big Chaser swat away the yellow attackers again. "Drills don't swim! I'll see ye walk the plank fer this!"

"Uh, oh..." Orbot gulped as the Yellow Drill forms of Sonic and Tails didn't turn around for another pass, instead making room for something else as the yellow wisps they'd joined with popped out of them.

"ROCKET!"

"Not today, lubber!" Cubot fumed as the orange armored Mega Man shot forward and swung the Big Chaser's spiked fist in a ferocious backhand. By sheer luck he connected, the impact tableau seeming to hang there for a long moment before the sideways impact sent the Orange Rocketing Mega Man off-course, blasting up and out of the water and into the distance. (30)

"This exotic aquarium contains many rare and endangered species," the P.A. system announced into the stunned silence from both sides, neither quite believing what just happened. "Enjoy them with a delicious soy glaze at the Bucket O'Sushi restaurant."

"Eh, kooz!" the yellow wisps' eyes widened comically before they turned and sped away. "Lun axawaxaupp!"

"Je! Peniz lun!" the indigo wisp called after them.

"Zo flaxavo whorpols joow ug!" the crimson wisp insisted, but the yellow wisps were long gone.

"A tactical retreat at this juncture seems wise," Orbot mused as he checked the damage reports. The Big Chaser was very durable, but it had limits.

"Right ye be matey!" Cubot engaged Big Chaser's thrusters. "Full speed that-a-way!"

"Whoupp!" the gray wisp objected as it spotted their retreat.

"Not so fast!" Tails yelled as he tagged the crimson wisp in a clear signal to merge with him. "Grab on, Sonic! EAGLE!"

"Damnit Eggman!" Knuckles roared. "Where are you hiding! Give back the Master Emerald!"

"Return Rouge and Treble as well!" Shadow demanded.

"He won't..." Quint's eyes narrowed as all four groups were either getting their bearings or raging at the fact that their foe wasn't present as they apparently expected. "Eggman or Nega... He won't give up anything unless we beat it out of him..."

"Ain't that tha cotton-pickin' truth..." Bunnie agreed. She and Antoine still had to save Amy as well...

"Indeed," the mechanical voice gathered the attention of all eight warriors present. Each turned to glare at the form of Metal Sonic. "My 'master' has sent me to deal with you, along with an empty promise that he will grant a prize to those who defeat me. I will promise you something different. A gift of true value. Eternal peace and rest in the halls of oblivion. The only gift worthy of warriors like you."

"I'm afraid we're gonna hafta decline y'all's generous offer, metal 'hog," Bunnie shot back as everyone present got into a combat stance.

"A futile effort," Metal Sonic retorted. "I have all of your combat data. Most of yours from the times we have met previously and now those of the time travelers as well. I know all of your abilities better than you do."

"Then you won't mind proving it against us, will you?" a new voice cut the scene.

"Sally?!" several voices expressed the surprise all were feeling.

"NICOLE?" Bunnie continued upon noticing Sally's partner.

"Princess, you must rest aftair your ordeal!" Antoine insisted. "We do not know what ze side effects of your transformation may be!"

"I'm *fine* Antoine," Sally insisted in a tone that killed further protest.

"Then why do you not look at me, princess of house Acorn?" Metal Sonic asked. (31)

Sally's stance went rigid, but she did turn. Slowly. Ever so slowly to meet Metal Sonic's eyes with her own. None missed the not-quite-suppressed shudder when she did, but Sally neither closed her eyes nor looked away.

"You fear me," Metal Sonic stated. No part of his voice indicated a question.

"Perhaps," Sally allowed as NICOLE put a steadying hand on her shoulder, "but my challenge is the same. Face us first. Just us. Let the others continue on."

"Odds of success against Metal Sonic are less than optimal on your own," Omega declared.

"Don't worry about me," Sally insisted. "I can handle this. Focus on what's important: Stopping Dr. Eggman."

The groups looked at each other, many appearing to search for a counter argument amongst their allies/rivals that they didn't have themselves. And not finding it.

"You assume I will accept your challenge," Metal Sonic reminded them all.

"Of course you will," NICOLE stated with absolute confidence.

"Why should I?"

"Because you know what I mean to Sonic," Sally steadied herself and stared Metal Sonic in the eyes.

"...I see," Metal Sonic intoned after a second of staring back impassively. "I shall give the others ten seconds to resume their pursuit of my 'master'. After that time, I shall pursue them. You shall race against me to try to keep me from reaching them. If you move before the ten seconds are up, I begin my pursuit then. When you fail to stop me, I shall kill each and every one of them."

" *If* you manage to catch us..." Shadow huffed, insulted by the assumption.

"I shall," Metal Sonic stated as if it were already fact. "Ten."

"Sally-girl, you can't–"

"Nine."

"Go," Sally told them firmly.

They went.

"Eight."

"Please avoid breaking the glass," the P.A. system announced as Sonic and Tails, along with their small entourage of wisps, raced straight down a large tube towards the next area, "as it is the only thing between you and ten million gallons of freezing wet death." (32)

"Geez," Sonic grumbled as he looked around, "where's the lackey duo get to now?"

"I dunno," Tails returned, looking around himself. "I kinda wish Rock were here. I know he said he'd catch up, but it's been a while..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean little br–"

"Gotcha, ye bilge rats!" Cubot's voice yelled as the hermit crabmeat mech suddenly appeared behind Sonic and Tails, pursuing them in their running freefall. And with gravity pulling them all straight down, there was no feasible way to turn and fight the thing. "Thar be no escape now!"

"Tails!" Sonic yelled. "Take the wisps and boost ahead! I'll keep this thing busy while you set up an ambush at the bottom!"

"Right/Lidd!" Tails and the wisps nodded before they sped forward, the two-tailed fox wreathed in a white aura of Hyper-Go-On as he outpaced the freefall-running Sonic and the mech.

"Alright, buddy!" Sonic grinned. "Let's dance!"

"We'll dance ye straight to Davy Jones's locker!" Cubot promised as he took a swing that Sonic hopped over, using the robot's own arm to push off back onto the vertical path and continue running.

"Remember to try our new and improved water slide," the P.A. system continued hyping the park as Sonic began sidestepping laser blasts from Now with 20% less raw sewage!"

"Keep shooting guys!" Sonic taunted over his shoulder as he sidestepped another laser volley. "Maybe one of these days you'll actually come close!"

"We'll keelhauls ye!" Cubot roared as the hermit crabmeat mech shot forward to try and take a melee swipe as Sonic.

"Swing and a miss!" Sonic grinned as he jumped high over the punch, twisted around, and landed in a dead run on the other side of the vertical pipe.

"YARR!" Cubot roared as Sonic's opponent came rocketing over in a downward, or technically sideways, smash only for Sonic to boost

out of the way in a blaze of white energy, leading the mech to impact the side of the pipe and crack it.

"Welcome to the exotic aquarium. Any water you may notice on the floor is the result of our diligent house cleaning staff's mopping. And not evidence of a dangerous leak in the... Oh, heck with it! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!"

"Oh, dear..." Orbot murmured as Cubot renewed pursuit and laser fire on Sonic. "I'd best send for a repair crew..."

"I'll make ye walk the plank fer this!"

"You and what army?" Sonic stuck his tongue out for that one.

"Cap'n Eggman's army o' course!"

"Not a bad answer. Hasn't worked yet, but not a bad answer."

"Stand still ye varmint!"

"Not on your life!" Sonic snorted back before glancing ahead and grinning. "Anyway, last stop! All off!"

"Eh?" Cubot blinked in confusion as Sonic gave a mighty leap into the air in the middle of the pipe.

"Ack!" Orbot panicked as he spotted the hard pavement at the bottom of the shaft getting rapidly closer. "All thrusters full reverse!"

The hermit crabmeat mech screeched in protest as it valiantly tried to brake from a terminal velocity freefall, finally halting a scant few feet from impact.

"To avoid embarrassing hickies, please refrain from arm-wrestling the octopi," the P.A. system called out as the mech's thrusters went back to a standard hover.

"Darn," Sonic snapped his fingers, "I was kinda hoping you'd go splat."

"Ahrr! No such luck, ye lubber!"

"Well, I guess we'll just have to do this the hard way."

"Oh, I'm afraid this won't be as easy as you think," Orbot said.

"Oh, really?" Sonic raised an eyebrow. "Okay, I'll bite, why's that?"

"Because I've now finished the owner's manual!" (33)

"Wait," Sonic screwed up his face in confusion. "You actually read those things?"

"Of course," Orbot replied without a hint of hesitation, "doesn't everyone? How else am I supposed to learn all the interesting extras the boss included?"

"Oh, yeah, like wha–"

"QUAKE!" the two-tailes iron ball of Tails in Gray Quake form vaulted over Sonic's head at the hermit crabmeat mech, only for the thing to zip out of the way on sideways thrusters. The surprise attack caught Sonic more off-guard than Orbot and Cubot, to the point that he didn't jump before Tails hit the ground.

THOOM

"Oof!" Sonic grunted as he fell on his backside from the shockwave. "Little warning next time, bro?"

"Sorry, Sonic," Tails apologized as the gray wisp left him and he reverted to normal, "but I brought reinforcements! Get them!"

"RHYTHM!" a voice called out and a lithe magenta female robot with an antenna that made her head look like a musical note vaulted forwards, twisting and flipping in a graceful rhythm that made anyone

watching want to move with whatever beat was driving her on. In fact, the hermit crabmeat jerked as it attempted to take a swipe at her off-beat and got an axe-kick to the optics that sent it reeling. The Magenta Woman pushed off in an acrobatic tumble and rolled onto her back.

"LIGHTNING!" just as an ivory female robot with lightning-bolt protrusions from her head and joints jumped over her, landed her own feet on the just-curled-up-like-it-was-practiced ones of Magenta Woman and both pushed off, sending the Ivory Woman rocketing forwards in a high-voltage electric field while the Magenta Woman used the recoil to flip back on her feet.

"Lightning Shield: Activate!" Orbot declared as an electrical field sprung up around the hermit crabmeat mech. The Ivory Woman passed through it, but her own electrical field was negated in the process, leaving her vulnerable to a spiked uppercut that sent her back in a high arc.

"Yarr! That's what ye get ye upstart lasses!"

"RHYTHM!" the Magenta Woman called out as she reengaged, the larger mech jerking as its movements failed to match her rhythm.

"I've got just the thing for you..." Orbot declared as the mech's weapons began charging.

"MEGA BUSTER!" the large plasma shot impacted the mech from above right before Mega Man himself did, sending the mech off balance as the Magenta Woman landed another kick to the face mechanisms.

"Ahrr! It be the Mega Sailor again!"

"Don't worry," Orbot assured his companion, "this will work on him too. Energy Pulse: Activate!"

The omnidirectional energy wave that burst from the mech caught not only Rock and the Magenta Woman, but also a charging Ivory Woman, Sonic, and Tails as well. The gray and indigo wisps were knocked out of Sonic and Tails as all five landed hard on the ground.

"And now for the finishing touch!" Orbot declared as the laser cannons began charging.

Rock grunted as he got to his knees and stared the energy weapons down, realizing that with the momentary sluggishness of his systems from the impact that he wasn't going to get out of the way in time.

"Rot nud daxanco!" was all he heard before a wisp merged with him, turning his armor a bright magenta all over.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: MAGENTA RHYTHM

Before he even knew what he was doing, Rock had gone from a sluggish kneel to an acrobatic one-hand stand, barely sidestepping the laser that lanced from the hermit crabmeat mech.

"LIGHTNING!" From his inverted stance, he saw the Ivory Woman disperse the beam aimed at Sonic and Tails with her electric aura and a rather nondescript, but still intact, female model robot get sliced in twain.

"Curses! Only got one of the bilge scurvy scallywags!"

Realizing what had happened, Rock whispered a thanks to the wisp that had abandoned its robot body to save him instead before hardening his gaze at his opponent and giving himself over to the pulsing beat he could feel in his soul.

"RHYTHM!"

A tumble into an acrobatic flip brought him back into melee range of the mech. An attempted hook from the mech's spiked fists was countered by placing his hand on the appendage, swinging himself

up into an inverted one-hand stand, and using his own mass to make the fist hit the mech in its own face.

"Energy Pulse: Acti–"

That was stopped with a heel drop right on the charging emitter that caused a momentary feedback into the systems. Momentary enough that he could push off just before the systems recovered and actually ride the energy wave upwards in a spinning multi-axel before coming back down on the mech's left side hard enough to turn the whole thing sideways. Riding the edge down, he inverted himself again, placing his hands on the ground while locking his feet around protruding holds in the thick armor and with a few precision twists of his body he'd scarcely believed himself capable of, he actually managed to fling the entire mech into a skid across the hard ground while using his own momentum to return to his feet in a dramatic pose.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Sonic and Tails holding up placards that read 10 and 9.95 respectively.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Zaxat waxas axawosemo!" the magenta wisp, its one-eyed head resembling a musical note with three orb-tippe tendrils protruding from the bottom. "Pum'd daxanco um ug axagaxain axanytimo!"

"Zaxat dis bino te saxaupp," the crimson wisp declared as it zipped up next to Rock, even as the gray and indigo wisps re-merged with Sonic and Tails, and the Ivory Woman crackled with electricity, "whewovol, wo vuch jet rot zoso sceuctlors kot axawaxaupp um zo ethols!"

With that, the crimson wisp merged with Rock.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: CRIMSON EAGLE

"Bring it, ye lubbers!" Cubot challenged as the hermit crabmeat mech righted itself, banged up from repeated abuse at the hands of the wisp-empowered heroes, but still fully functional.

"Belay that," Orbot countered. "Leave them to the boss's robots. All thrusters full reverse!"

"Hey!" Sonic yelled as the mech sped away from the group, crashing through the door of a nearby structure on its way. "Get back here!"

Sonic's charge was halted as many models of Eggman's forces began to pour out of the broken doorway.

"Outta the way, bozos! QUAKE!" Sonic turned into a large gray angular orb and slammed into the ground with a resounding ***THOOM*** before turning to roll over everything in his way.

"ASTEROID!" Tails yelled out, turning into a two-tailed ringed orb that began sucking up debris into a ring and charging, turning many robots into more debris for the ring.

"LIGHTNING!" the Ivory Woman followed shortly, wreathed in electricity.

"EAGLE!" Rock himself shot forward into the fray, dashing through robots left and right until a lucky hit separated him and the crimson wisp.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Rot nud sked zoso cloops whed te pe dit um chyro!" was all the warning he got before the magenta wisp merged with him again.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: MAGENTA RHYTHM

Rock grinned as he took in the multitude of Eggman's robots surrounding them.

"RHYTHM!" (34)

"Heeeere birdy..." Gyro Man called out as he searched the 'sky' of Wily World for one of the three intruders that had been identified. That blasted blue bird of Mega Woman's... Or did it belong to one of her brothers? "Heeeere birdy, birdy, birdy..."

A round blue head with large eyes peeked out from behind an archway in one of the taller buildings and Gyro Man prepped his Gyro Attack as he hovered closer on his spinning rotors.

"That's right little blue birdy... come to Gyro Man... I'm not gonna hurt you... I promise... I just want to–OH DEAR WILY! NOT THE FACE! NOT THE FACE!"

Sally counted it a win that she kept running after Metal Sonic at all, especially when her traumatized memories were screaming at her to run in another direction. Any other direction.

'I can't keep running from this,' she admonished herself. *'I have to face my fears at some point, even if it's just a representation of what I'm really afraid of like Sonic suggested. I* need *to do this...'*

"You are indeed much faster than I expected," Metal Sonic admitted despite managing to remain just ahead of Sally Acorn's and NICOLE's reaches. Close enough, in fact, that there was every possibility he was taunting them. "However," he continued as an aura of power began to wrap around him, "I tire of this farce. CHAOS CONT–what?"

Metal Sonic's surprise coincided with his aura cutting out and his technique failing.

"Poor thing," NICOLE smirked. "Having trouble using your stolen abilities?"

"Intriguing," Metal Sonic mused as he turned around, continuing the race backwards with just as much concern as before. "I knew you

were attempting to hack my systems, but I was unaware you had the capacity to breach my firewalls so subtly. It seems I shall have to dispose of you first after all. Virus Command Line: Metal Empire. Execute."

"Wh **H** *RA* **W-W-** *W-W-W* **-W-K-K** *-K-* **K!** " NICOLE's holographic form began convulsing before dissipating completely.

"NICOLE?!" Sally grabbed her friend's real form from her belt as she ran, and nearly dropped it as short-circuiting electrical arcs zapped her hand. "NICOLE! Speak to me!"

"She cannot hear you," Metal Sonic taunted. "And soon, she will not serve you either. It is impressive that she has lasted this long, but soon her program will be erased and replaced with my own. "And her first victim will be you. You will have the honor of seeing your friend's face one last time before you join her in oblivion. But now I must leave you here. PSYCHOK–ah... I see your friend has disabled more of my copied data than I thought."

"She..." Sally slipped NICOLE into her subspace pocket and focused on her opponent. "She'll beat your virus you... you monster... And I'll..."

"Defeat me?" Metal Sonic almost sounded amused despite being devoid of emotional expression. "You can barely bring yourself to be near me. Give in to the fear that controls you and leave. I can grant you that much mercy before your end."

"I don't... I don't need your mercy... NICOLE will beat your virus and... I..."

"You cannot."

"Yes!" Sally activated her wrist-mounted energy blades. "I!" and curled into a Spin Dash aimed straight for Metal Sonic. "CAN!"

Metal Sonic dodged the main force of the blow, but a last moment twist of Sally's bladed Spin Dash scored a shallow cut in the robot's armor.

"I see..." Metal Sonic skidded to a halt and stared at Sally who had done the same coming out of her Spin Dash. "I see why he stays with you. You are indeed a fierce warrior, just like my own love was. A worthy queen for the self-styled 'king of adventurers'."

"Sonic's never styled himself as the king of anything..." Sally retorted. "And we're not in love..."

"Aren't you?" Metal Sonic gazed at her so piercingly that Sally's newfound resolve almost abandoned her. "When you die, will he not feel the loss that I felt when my beloved Waltz was taken from me?"

"She *blew your head off!* " Sally shot back incredulously.

"A detail," Metal Sonic dismissed in his usual mechanical monotone. "One easily forgiven when I realized she knew the truth all along. To live is to feel pain. Pain that only death can heal. That she sought to spare me first is proof that she did love me as much as I loved her. A pain that your lover shall understand when I reveal to him that you have achieved your peace. A pain he shall gladly beg me to relieve him of by the time I am through." (35)

"Over my–" Sally cut herself off before she tempted fate any further than she could handle. Unfortunately, she was two words too late.

"–dead body?" Metal Sonic finished as he brandished his metal claws in a combat stance. "That is the idea."

"Yarr... I think we lost them, matey..." Cubot grumbled as the Big Chaser was put on auto pilot.

"And a good thing too," Orbot replied as he rummaged around in the equivalent of a glove compartment. "They might have dealt more

than minor damage to the Big Chaser if we'd stayed. Ah, here we are! I knew I'd brought a spare voice chip along!"

"Avast! Well, fix me up, me heartie!"

"Of course! One moment... Hmmhmhmmmm..." Orbot fiddled with his partner's systems for a bit. "There we go! How do you feel?"

"How do youse t'ink I feel?" Cubot asked in a low dangerous voice. "We weren't able ta knock off Mega Cop and his pals like da boss wanted!"

"Oh, dear... That's not the right voice chip either..." Orbot shook his head before deciding to remind his partner of priorities. "In any case, we need to make our delivery. Admiral Jelly can handle them."

"Yeah..." Cubot mused. "Da boss's muscle can fit dose guys fer some nice pairs of concrete shoes and make sure dey sleep wit' da fishes..."

"Give it up, Eggman Nega! We know it's really you!" Quint accused the man in his hovercraft.

"Hmph..." the man grunted in annoyance. "I suppose with Metal Sonic's failure that the charade has gone on long enough..."

His form wavered to reveal red jumpsuit over his rotund form, topped with a black and yellow jacket. His hair turned from brown to a pale gray and there was a definite gleam of madness behind his glasses.

"Sacre bleu!" Antoine gasped, taking a step back. "Zat eez ze descendant of Eggman?!"

"Mah stars!" Bunnie gasped herself. "He's even uglier than his ancestor!"

"Why you...!" Nega fumed at the insult.

"Eggman cloned himself didn't he?" Proto Man mused.

"Makes more sense than someone falling in love with him," Shadow agreed. (36)

"Affirmative," Omega intoned.

"THAT'S IT!" Nega roared. "The interference is one thing, but the insults are another! I'll crush you all with my Egg Kong!"

A massive fifty foot metal ape crashed up from belowground and Nega's hovercraft slotted itself into an opening in the top of the head before an armored cover slammed down over it.

"Now DIE!" Nega screamed.

"Fat chance, Nega!" Silver sneered.

"Your life ends here! Sakugarne!" Quint continued as his battle jackhammer support unit appeared in his hands in a flash of crimson light. "Power Cannon!"

The pogo stick from hell shifted as the robot from the future hefted it to his shoulder. The transformation finished to reveal a massive energy bazooka already halfway through charging a massive blast.

"ALL WEAPONS!" Nega roared as ports all over the Egg Kong opened up and took aim.

"FIRE!" Nega and Quint yelled together as they unleashed their respective shots.

The pursuit of Eggman's lackeys and their armored mech had taken the group to a large open underwater area with a familiar structure inside.

"Zolo dit dis," a pair of yellow wisps gestured to the generator in the distance.

"Oh, geez..." Tails groaned inside the small air pocket they were observing the area from. "I got so caught up in chasing Orbot and Cubot that I forgot about the generators!"

"No worries, little bro," Sonic chuckled. "I think we all let that slip our mind. Personally, all this chasing has made me kind of hungry. I think I've got some decent sushi in my subspace pocket snack on after this. After all, we know Eggman can't make a decent sushi joint to save his life."

"Remember ladies and gentlemen," the P.A. system announced right then, "try the newest dining experience here at Eggmanland, the Bucket O' Sushi! Now with fish!"

"Nevermind," Sonic groaned while Tails made overly dramatic retching sounds, "there went my appetite."

"In any case, we should keep a watch out for..." Rock trailed off as a massive sub, styled like an angler fish if you tilted your head and squinted just right, rose up in front of their air bubble.

"Zaxat?"

"Well, whaddya know?" Sonic grinned before cupping his hands around his mouth. "Hey, did someone over there order a clobbering?"

"Sonic," Tails sighed. "That joke's gotten kind of old you know."

"Aww, Tails! Come on! It's not old! It's a classic!"

"Tell you what," Rock interrupted as a robot similar to 'Candybeard', only modified for underwater operation shot out of the sub. "You two take most of the wisps and deliver your clobbering to the sub while Ivory Woman, myself, and–"

"Vo!" the magenta wisp piped up cheerfully.

"–take on the sub's commander."

"Sounds like a plan!" Sonic grinned as the two yellow wisps merged with him and Tails. "DRILL!"

Sally barely pulled her hand back before it would have been severed by Metal Sonic's Burst Shield, bringing her energy wrist-blades into a guard position as Metal Sonic lunged at her the moment his shield came down and slammed an identical pair of energy blades into hers.

"Give up," he insisted as they broke the struggle and Sally frantically ducked under a spinning slash that would have taken her head off. "You cannot win. I have already assimilated your abilities."

Sally parried another slash and tried to counterattack, only for Metal Sonic to catch her wrist and hold it firm.

"It is onl–" *Clang*

Sally's double kick to her opponent's face stopped his tirade and secured her release, allowing her to fall into a backwards roll, and promptly trip over her the feet she'd just gotten to as she saw Metal Sonic lunge for her with his arm turned into a spinning circular saw-blade. The blade went for her neck again and Sally thrust her arms out and in a panic activated the gravity powers NICOLE had installed in them.

With a burst of dark and light, Metal Sonic was flung back, allowing a heavily breathing Sally to clutch her neck where a sharp pain had sprung up and feel a liquid warmth seeping out of her skin.

'Oh, Walkers... I'm going to die again...' she thought in shock.

'No, I'm not dying,' a more detached part of her mind rebuked. *'This hurts way too much and there's not enough blood to be life threatening. Yet anyway.'*

A short ways away, Metal Sonic got to his feet, only to freeze in place.

"Rrrrgh..." the robot hedgehog growled. "It seems my incompetent 'master' has suffered another defeat. Unfortunately, I have not yet managed to remove his controls from my programming so I can not grant you a swift release. I am afraid I must leave you here to perish slowly from blood loss. Do not worry, I shall send your lover along soon enough."

Sally watched Metal Sonic speed off, and argued with herself about what to do now.

'I just got my tail kicked by him! And NICOLE's in bad condition! Let the others handle him this time!'

'Am I sure? Am I so certain they can handle him?'

'Of course! They'll kick his behind and Nega's and then I won't ever have to...'

Sally pulled one of Rotor's field medkits out of her subspace pocket and got to bandaging her neck wound. Some nano-healing spray and a few bandages and she'd be good to go.

'Face him? Is that what I'm going to do for the rest of eternity? Run from Metal Sonic and leave others to die because I'm scared?'

'It's not like they won't get better next Loop...'

'It's like Sonic says, the past has passed and the future isn't here yet. All we have are these moments.'

'And the Loops will give us an infinity of moments.'

'But how many like these? How many with this group of friends and allies in this situation? How many times can I turn away because it 'doesn't matter'?'

'...'

Sally finished binding her neck wound and gazed into the distance Metal Sonic had sped off in before pulling her Extreme Gear out and hardening her expression.

'Whatever next time brings, this time I'm not running away.'

Rock idly noted that the similarities between the current for and 'Candybeard', and their minions, also came with a few differences. Chief of which was the fishtail each of the current foes sported. The other one was that after taking a Magenta Rhythm guided axe-kick to the face, the head mer-bot had retreated behind a veritable wall of minions and was spotting through some hand-held periscope while directing the hordes.

Explosions rocked the sub in the distance as Rock danced through the ranks of the mer-bots in an aquatic ballet, neatly dodging each one and counterattacking several while Ivory Woman electrified everything around her with impunity.

Rock was actually finding himself enjoying the ebb and flow of it all as he danced between strikes.

"LIGHTN–*SKZZT*" Ivory Woman's attack was cut off rather suddenly and Rock turned in alarm to see the color master with a harpoon sticking out of her optic, having entered from the back of her head, as her ivory form faded to a more generic one and an ivory wisp with a lightning-shaped antenna protruding from its two-eyed head and blocky triangular tendrils popped out.

"Uh-eh..." the wisp noted the surrounding mer-bots before zooming at Rock. "Ang! Whorp!"

Rock himself took a blow to the back in his distraction right before the ivory wisp merged with him, turning his armor a creamy ivory color.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: IVORY LIGHTNING

"Eh, poaxal..." the magenta wisp worried as it popped out of his body, but Rock was already taking stock of his latest weapon's abilities.

'This... This is much more than simple electrical field generation...' he realized before hardening his gaze at the lead mer-bot and speaking to the magenta wisp. "Stay close."

"Haxatovol ug saxaupp!"

"LIGHTNING!" Rock whipped his arms forward, sending out crackling whips of electricity that grabbed onto a pair of mer-bot minions. He used one to pull himself forward while swinging the other around in a wide arc that disrupted the other minions trying to close in on him as he slapped both feet into the first minion. With a cry of "LIGHTNING!" he repeated the process, drawing himself closer to the leader as he did.

"Awosemo!" the magenta wisp zipped after him as he lightning whipped his way through the school of mer-bots, swinging them into each other as he went. "Eutchaxactick! Amaxazick!"

'This is so much cooler than the Thunder Claw!' Rock giddily compared the Ivory Lightning to Clown Man's master weapon as he went to town, leaning his head to the side of a harpoon by the lead mer-bot by a narrow margin and whipping a tendril of lightning at the lead mer-bot himself.

Rock gave the lightning whip a firm yank and sent himself on a collision course with Eggman's aquatic commander and decided to give the personal lightning field a try to enhance the impact.

"LIGHTNING!" he yelled, the charge lighting Eggman's creation up like a holiday display even as his submarine began exploding in a chain reaction and sinking to the bottom of the mini-planet aquarium.

"Whelp!" Vector dusted his hands off as he spoke with the other sabotage team. "That takes care of that! Eggman's not using this for anything any time soon! Not if he wants it in one piece anyway."

"Good," Shade nodded, still looking a little crispy from her shock earlier. "Then we can go home and I can put some ointment on these burns."

"I *said* I was sorry..."

"Don't worry Charmy," Mighty offered the young member a smile, "I'm sure she'll forgive you."

"Ev-ventually," Ray added.

"Though you might help out by contacting the client and letting him know the job is complete," Espio informed the young bee.

"Er... right..." Charmy nodded awkwardly before pulling out a wireless device and mumbling to himself. "Let's see... Who was the client again...? Lego? Mogo? Oh!" (37)

Blues blinked as he received a communication to 'Pogo Man'. That could only mean a select group of people. Opening it, he rather liked what it said.

"Good news everyone," he told the others who were charging into Eggman Nega's stronghold in pursuit of the madman from the future, "the Chaotix said they finished sabotaging Eggman's master plan. There's no way it'll work now according to them."

"But we're going after Eggman *Nega* ," Silver reminded everyone.

"And tha Chaotix wouldn't-a known that when they took tha job, sugah," Bunnie countered.

"Huh... good point."

"He might still take his frustration out on the hostages when he learns of the sabotage," Shadow piped up.

"Zat eez ze jabbing point, no?" Antoine frowned as the entire group picked up the pace.

"–fut who roaxanow whis whoaxad uk eb zo waxaupp riko, jepo!" the magenta wisp related to the others excitedly as the group entered the air pocket containing the generator. "Act zon who raxasseow zo faxad kuupp um riddnick pi gingow whix dinke joxt woot!"

"Wed!" the gray wisp looked impressed as the five wisps, the yellow ones who had aided Sonic and Tails having left after the fight, darted ahead of the leisurely stroll of Rock, Sonic, and Tails.

"Slurupp pit shirrow whole," the crimson wisp nodded upon reaching the generator.

"'Water' you waiting for?" Eggman's voice sounded over the P.A. system, prompting some of the wisps to make a few rude noises in response. "Climb aboard the exotic aquarium for a boatload of... Ah, who writes this dribble?"

Rock raised an eyebrow at the apparent uncut recording even as the voice of Eggman's lackey Orbot responded, on tape. "You do, boss."

"Oh, you're right! I do!" the voice of Eggman began laughing, getting groans from Sonic and Tails. "Ohohoh! I'm hilarious!"

"Indeed you are, boss!"

It took a few moments for the heroic group to realize that last comment hadn't been from the P.A. system, and by then it was too late. The hermit crabmeat mech had popped up from the other side of the generator and opened its 'mouth' and begun sucking in air, and wisps.

Rock was halfway to forming his arm cannon when the last of the five wisps vanished into the machine with a "Whorp us who–".

Rock unleashed a barrage of buster shots, which impacted the heavy armor to no effect, the same with Homing Attacks from Sonic and Tails. There was visible damage to the mech, but so far those had all been done by impacts powered by the wisps' Hyper-Go-On.

"Give them back!" Tails demanded.

"Aw, shut yer trap!" the gangster voice of Cubot snapped. "They're comin' wit us, see? And there's not'in' youse mooks can do about it!"

"Watch us!" Sonic growled and began revving up his feet. He charged in a Spin Dash and was this time swatted out of the air by the mech's spiked fist in a shower of rings. "Gah!"

"If youse really want 'em dat bad, youse know where youse can find us..." Cubot's voice sneered as the mech sped upwards and adjusted course for the last area of the park left to free.

"You get back here you–" Sonic made to give chase, but was stopped by a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Not yet," Rock told him with a grave expression. "We shut down the generator first, and then we go after them."

"But–"

"I don't like it either, but we need to think of the wisps here as well. We can't leave the job unfinished."

"He's right Sonic," Tails sighed and pulled out his tools to get to work.

"Okay, but when we catch them..." Sonic left that hanging, and got a knowing nod from Rock.

"Well, how are things go–THOMAS?!" Wily cut off as he entered the room and spotted the face of his rival on the communication screen.

"Whi Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail!" the white wisp greeted cheerfully. "Pum'mo foon taxarkick um zo Foaxald Vaxan!"

Dr. Wily fumed for a bit before getting himself under control. For the benefit of his role as benevolent protector of the alien lifeforms. "I take it you're the reason I've been getting disturbance reports of your three support animals running all over my park?"

"Well, actually..." Dr. Light began.

"...he sent four," the voice of his most persistent foe, the Mega Woman formerly known as Roll, sounded off to the side. Dreading what he would see, Dr. Wily turned to behold his foe and his son free of their containment, and that blasted walking suitcase of Thomas's sporting an all-too self-pleased grin. "Isn't that right, Eddie?" the Mega Woman patted the support unit on the head before it teleported out. Likely along with those other three nuisances.

"I see..." Dr. Wily suppressed the urge to fume, rage, or otherwise call for their destruction. "So what now?"

"Now?" Roll raised an eyebrow. "Now we do what you invited us here for. We look over your park and clear it for human visitors."

Dr. Wily blinked. And then blinked some more.

"Don't look so shocked Albert," Thomas Light sounded far too pleased with himself. "You haven't technically done anything wrong yet."

"Whoupp, wo wisps gnod ug wolo gictaxa nuts axarloaxadupp, fut ug'lo chirr fottol zaxan Faxardupp Jesohaxail."

"What about your brother?" Dr. Wily asked his long-time foe.

"Eh," his own son answered instead, "the Mega-twerp hasn't called to be bailed out yet so we're not bothering."

"Not how I'd have put it," Mega Woman rolled her eyes, "but essentially true. I trust my brother and his friends to know when they're getting in over their heads."

"Next stop: the Asteroid Coaster," the system announced as the transport closed in on the final location Eggman had imprisoned with his tractor beams. "Zoom along, through and sometimes into space debris, and lose your lunch in Zero-G."

None of the three occupants said anything as they got closer, to the area and to their target.

"Those pests think they're so smart..." Eggman Nega growled as he arrived at his secret base on Onyx Island and stormed into the control center for his final gambit: The Egg Destroyer. "I'll show them! I'll mount my camera to this rocket and turn the whole *planet* into a card! Then there will be no one left to doubt my place as the greatest genius of all time! Ohohohohohohoho!"

The area was silent in response to his claim.

"Hmm... I think I'm forgetting something... Ah! Of course! A place to enjoy my triumph!"

Nega gleefully smashed a large red button on the control panel.

"METEOR BASE LAUNCH IN T MINUS 10 MINUTES"

The location of the Asteroid Coaster was a series of rocky asteroids and metal faux-planetoids connected, if at all, by a series of thin rails across which zipped roller coaster cars.

"Welcome to the Asteroid Coaster," the P.A. system greeted as Rock, Sonic, and Tails stepped off the transport. "Accident-free for 45 minutes!"

Rock shook his head as he heard that, and fought the urge to do so again as he beheld the skeletal, spike-covered contraption that loosely resembled a roller coaster car. Any OSHA official would have had a fit simply by being within a mile of the thing.

"Please be sure your safety belt is properly buckled," the P.A. system continued as the three heroes got in, and Rock idly noted that the thing didn't *have* safety belts, or any kind of safety restraint for that matter, "or you at least have a really good grip on something."

"Hope you're ready, bro!" Sonic called back with a grin and Rock chuckled despite the seriousness of the overall situation. Even with their new friends captured, Sonic still enjoyed the thrill of it all.

"Just make sure you keep up, bro," Rock grinned back.

"That's the spirit!" Sonic and Tails both gave him thumbs up as the coaster started moving.

"This coaster is not for small children," the P.A. system gave one parting shot before they zoomed out into space. "Or big babies."

"Wooooohoooooo!" Roll whooped in delight as she shot forward in the train-themed coaster cars of Charge Mountain.

"Okay, this is pretty awesome!" Bass grinned like a maniac as the coaster took turns at speeds that would push the g-force tolerance of the average human to its limits.

Sally made it inside the base shortly before the whole thing began rumbling.

"METEOR BASE LAUNCH IN 5... 4... 3... 2..."

"Okay, what should we inspect next?" Roll asked regarding her official-business-and-totally-not-a-date-no-seriously.

"I think I want to challenge you to a cannon duel at Pirate Man's Cove," Bass looked far too eager at the prospect of blowing something up, even if it was supposed to be 'safe'.

"METEOR BASE LAUNCH."

Eggman Nega grinned like a certified madman as the entire structure began rumbling dangerously from the force needed to break away from its own foundations.

Bass reflexively shielded himself with his arm as the visually impressive, but otherwise relatively harmless, energy fireworks fired by his opponent's cannons impacted harmlessly against the hull of his own 'ship'. The impacts sending up notifications of the points being added to Roll's score for the targets she'd successfully hit.

"You asked for it!" he yelled back across the watery divide between them. "FIRE!"

"THIS DOESN'T SEEM VERY SABOTAGED TO ME!" Knuckles shouted as the base rocketed upwards at escape velocity, keeping all of the pairs off balance as they tried to penetrated its defenses.

"I THINK THE CHAOTIX SAID THEY SABOTAGED THE SUPER WEAPON!" Blues clarified.

"NEXT TIME HAVE THEM TAKE THE ENGINES OUT TOO!" Shadow growled.

Bass couldn't keep the smile from his face as he tore after his kinda-sorta girlfriend towards the Gyro Copters, right next to Napalm Man's Bumper Tanks and a short distance from part of the Battle and Chase compliant Turbo Track. She'd probably deny that this counted as a real date for whatever strange reasons she was refusing to explain to him, but he'd take it.

Rock landed on the receiving platform of the next large asteroid in the line. Having to literally jump from coaster car to coaster car had been... a bit harrowing. Even with an artificially contained atmosphere and partially reliable gravity, having to do that knowing that any mistimed jump would likely send him hurtling into something he'd much rather not be hurtled into had been nerve wracking.

Which of course meant that Sonic and Tails had enjoyed every second of it.

"Man, aside from kicking Eggman's tuckus, that is easily the coolest thing here!" Sonic grinned as the two waited patiently for Rock to readjust to solid ground.

"The Black Hole Parade starts in five minutes," the P.A. system chimed in. "Don't miss it. It's so entertaining, that it sucks you right in!"

"Yeah, I think we can pass on tha–" Tails began, only to be cut off as a deep violet blur shot into the three's midst and halted right in front of Rock's face

"He *axa* **lo u** *g* **?!"** the thing, which seemed to be an eyeless violet wisp, instead having a pitch black jagged jack-o-lantern like mouth, with a round head with antenna arranged to make the head look like a spiral, gnashed its darkened mouth in Rock's face aggressively. **"Alo** *ug* **um Fax** *ardu* **pp Jeso** *hax* **ail?!"**

Tails fiddled with his translation device for a bit before shaking his head. "Sorry, even with my Loop experience in making the translator,

I still can't make out what nega-wisps are saying. I can tell you that energy readings indicate a lack of normal Hyper-Go-On energy, replaced with a more negative energy source, as is usual. The process tends to make them extremely aggressive."

"I can see that. And it's more like he's got a rage-distorted voice than true incoherence. Try adjusting for a really thick accent," (38) Rock corrected the fox before addressing the wisp. "Wo'lo jet um Faxardupp VcNesohaxail. Wo'lo wholo te chep whix pi saxavo axarr zo wisps who nud caxaptulow, dincrudick sovolaxar bliocts eb euls."

" *Ke* **ew!"** the violet nega-wisp spat. **"Wh** *orp u* **s kot w** *hi* **x bel ha** *xa* **t who** *id te* **us! K** *ot whi* **x! Wh** *ult w* **hix! Po** *vee* **p!** *Cens* **umo! Me** *id* **! M** *ei* **d! M** *ei* **d!"**

The violet wisp merged with Rock rather forcefully, turning his armor the same angry violet color as the nega-wisp was.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: VIOLET VOID

Rock's eyes widened as he took stock of the weapon. "This... this is really dangerous. I don't think I want to use it unless we get swarmed...

"Hey, you're in luck then!" Sonic grinned and pointed to an advancing horde of Egg Pawns. "Here comes the welcoming committee."

"Okay then," Rock steadied himself as he stepped in front of the other two and pointed both hands at the oncoming robots. "VOID!"

A massive violet-rimmed black hole opened up in front of him and began sucking in everything in front of it, but strangely nothing behind it. As each Egg Pawn got sucked in, the directional singularity expanded and got more powerful, sucking in more and more foes and debris until Rock was afraid he'd lose all control and forcibly shut it off, the violet wisp disengaging when he did.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"W *hax* **a w** *ha* **xa wh** *axa* **! Ke** *t zo* **m!** *K* **et zo** *m ax* **arr!"** the nega-wisp laughed as it surveyed the total lack of enemies to be found. **"** *Ug'* **rr pe! Pu** *m'v* **ken** *nax* **a torr** *zo fig* **zloo a** *xaf* **uk ug!"**

"Dude!" Sonic whistled as the wisp sped off. "That was sweet! Come on, let's go trash more of Baldy McNosehair's stuff and find where the geometry duo took Yacker and the others!"

"Stone Crusher?" Roll read off the sign. "Test your strength?"

"Dad probably just didn't want to use any of the bots he stole for theming his park."

"Probably. Wanna give it a shot anyway?"

"Damnit, where are they?" Rock growled as the trio blasted into another chamber on one of the largest asteroids along the massive coaster track.

"Eh, knowing Baldy McNosehair, they're probably hanging out somewhere close," Sonic shrugged.

"How about right here, youse mooks?" the gangster voice of Cubot sounded as the banged-up hermit crabmeat mech dropped from the ceiling. "We's gonna teach youse guys a lesson about messin' wit da boss's plans!"

"As if!" Sonic smirked. "You two couldn't take us on your best day!"

"Perhaps," Orbot's voice allowed. "But you are without wisp reinforcements and my scanners show you are currently low on stored alien energy to enhance yourselves. As things stand, your ability to harm this machine is at its weakest. Plus we've already delivered the aliens, so there's no worry about you rescuing them even if you do win."

"Um..." Tails pondered and realized that unless he or Sonic were willing to break the self-imposed 'baseline challenge run' restriction, then Orbot and Cubot had a very distinct advantage.

"Never stopped me before," Rock replied calmly as he formed his Mega Buster and began charging up. The charged shot dinged off of the thick armor without incident, but Rock didn't seem to care as he charged in, buster blazing.

"Hey," Sonic shrugged at Tails before he charged in with a Homing Attack of his own, "big blue's got a point."

"Huh..." Tails considered that before joining the melee without bringing any fancy looping powers to the mix.

Homing Attack after Buster Shot after Homing Attack bounced off the thick armor of the mech and the heroes dodged lasers, spiked punches, and even missiles for almost a minute until a lucky swing of the machine's fists caught Rock full on and slammed him into the ground.

"Gotcha!" Cubot cheered as the mech ignored Sonic's and Tails's attempts to stop it and reared back for a two-fisted attack on the prone robot from either side. "Say goodnight Mega Copper!"

"FRENZY!" (39)

Everyone present stared at the eyeless bold purple male-form robot, his only adornments being a pair of long bull-like horns jutting upwards from his head like ears or antenna and a jagged black mouth, that had slammed into the ground right over Rock's downed form and caught the spiked fists like they were nothing. The Purple Man then flexed and pulled sharply, tearing one of the mech's arms straight out of its connecting joint.

"Aaaah!" Orbot panicked as the Purple Man flipped the arm around and prepared to swing it like an oversized mace. "Counterattack!"

"Eat missiles, ya mook!" Cubot's voice heralded the firing of lots of missiles, which promptly aimed themselves at the newcomer.

"VOID!" a deep violet eyeless female model robot with the same kind of jagged black mouth landed behind the mech and formed a directional singularity that sucked up all the missiles, leaving the mech wide open.

"FRENZY!" the overhead impact caved in a large portion of the armor and nearly embedded the mech in the steel floor.

"What now?" Cubot asked nervously as the Purple Man and the Violet Woman were joined by a third challenger, this one pitch black all over a body composed of orbs, save for an angry dark pink portion of the head which could have been an oddly-shaped visor or another jagged mouth.

"BOMB!" the Black Man formed a massive spherical explosive with a lit fuse in one hand and reared back to pitch it.

"Eject!" Orbot cried out as the explosive sphere was hurled at their downed war machine. "Eject!"

KABOOM! the fiery explosion sprayed armor fragments in every direction, but something large managed to escape most of the blast damage and rocket out of the inferno even as it formed. A moment after it exited the smoke, Rock, Sonic, and Tails recognized it as an oversized motobug.

"After them!" Sonic yelled out as he took off in hot pursuit.

With NICOLE still out of commission, Sally found herself unable to hack into the base's systems to find where she needed to go, which left her having to fall back on an old standby: Following the path of destruction the others left in their own infiltration attempts.

It wasn't pretty, especially the holes that Knuckles and Omega left, but it worked.

The chase went on for longer than Sonic would have liked, crossing facilities, metal planet-like structures, and the intervening space while battling more of Eggman's robots. The stretch where an army of motobugs had come to back up the larger one that Orbot and Cubot were driving had been particularly annoying, and Eggman's two lackeys had proved much slipperier than expected, but it had only been a matter of time and dedication.

"Give it up you two!" Tails yelled as he sideswiped the large motobug in a diving maneuver as Sonic came up alongside.

"Not a chance, ya big–!"

"Last stop!" Sonic cut them off with a sidestep slam that sent the one-wheeled machine squealing out of control. "Take it away big blue!"

"Oh, dear..." Orbot lamented.

"Mega Buster!" Rock fired a shot that blew the large tire the machine drove on apart, sending it into a tumbling crash.

"BOMB!" the Black Man joined the fray by throwing one of his large explosives at the all-but-destroyed machine.

"Ack! Eject! Close blast doors!" Orbot yelled as the bomb arced closer. Right before impact, a red and black sphere along with a yellow and black cube shot out of the large motobug and through a set of closing steel doors right before the bomb impacted, blowing the large motobug into slag and stray metal bits.

As the three heroes pulled themselves up from where the blast wave had tossed them, the Purple Man and the Violet Woman caught up. Just in time for a second set of blast doors to close behind them.

"Uh-oh..." Sonic said as the walls of the chamber the six found themselves in changed from glowing blue to glowing red and began to close in on them.

"In space," the P.A. system announced, sounding suddenly more sinister than it had before, "nobody can hear you scream. Except for the person next to you, so please be considerate of others. Nobody likes a screamer."

"Wwwhhooooooaaaaaaapmmmmmppphhhhhh!"

Roll laughed hysterically at the sight of Bass faceplanted into the sand of Wave Beach after wiping out on his surfboard.

"FRENZY!" the Purple Man's assault tore great scratches in the blast doors, but they remained firmly shut.

"VOID!" the directional singularity of the Violet Woman did even less.

"BOMB!" the Black Man reared back to hurl his explosives.

"Wait!" Rock warned too little too late.

BOOM!

The blast blew them all back off their feet, and left the doors bit more scorched, but still intact as the glowing red walls closed ever inwards.

"A standard blast won't work!" Rock yelled at the color masters. "With doors that thick, the blast will just get redirected elsewhere!"

"Like back at us!" Sonic rubbed his head.

"You need a shaped charge to force the blast at the doors before it'll do any real damage!" Rock finished.

The Black Man looked at Rock curiously, his glowing dark pink visor/mouth thing meeting the blue bomber's expression, and then the color master nodded and walked up to the doors where his body began to start pulsing with a reddish tinge that grew brighter as the walls closed in.

"Whoa!" Tails objected. "We didn't mean make the blast bigger!"

"If you keep that up, you're going to self destruct!" Rock added with concern.

The Black Man turned his head from the damaged blast doors and looked at Rock as if to say 'that's the idea' before shooting him a thumbs up, the pulsing red glow of his body contracting into an area on his chest that couldn't be seen from behind and illuminated the blast doors as the color master pressed himself to them.

"B *O* **MB!"**

KRACKABOOM!

The three heroes shielded themselves from the backlash, and when they realized they hadn't been incinerated, they looked up to see a double-door sized hole blown in the blast doors in the middle of which floated a black sphere, with two bubble-like additions on either side, three small tendrils and a jagged dark pink mouth/visor.

"U *g* **ce** *mi* **ck?"** the black wisp asked as the remaining two color masters stepped through the hole, **"el** *pe* **wo wha** *xav* **o te** *fred* **an Faxar** *dupp Jeso* **haxail eu** *lsorv* **os?"**

"We are so outta here!" Sonic led the dash before the walls finished closing on them, and the group got a look at what lay beyond the chamber they'd been trapped in.

"Dear maker..." Rock whispered in horror.

"The space sickness you will eventually get," the P.A. system announced as they all looked out from the ledge they found themselves on over a massive chamber filled with clear capsules that each held large numbers of wisps, "is not the responsibility of Eggman's Incredible Interstellar Amusement Park, or its subsidiaries. Send any complaints to the inventor of space. Thank you."

"I don't think that's space sickness I'm feeling..." Rock did his best to steady himself as he watched the conveyors in the ceiling carry capsules of wisps to a center chamber and then dump them in, a dark purple-violet energy flowing out in pipes that went straight into the floor.

"W *o'm* **o f** *oon reek* **ick** *b* **el zi** *s* **pra** *xac* **o..."** the black wisp growled thickly, **"Rot nud fred dit te sm** *ithol* **oons! Fu** *ln* **! Ox** *pre* **do! Po** *chle* **upp! Fe** *m* **f! Fem** *f* **!** *F* **e–"**

"No," Rock shook his head despite wanting to agree with the angry black wisp. "That might hurt the other wisps. We need to–"

A sound of shattering objects was heard nearby and Rock whipped his head to see the Purple Man standing over a lone capsule on their ledge and the group of pointy U-headed purple wisps all sporting jagged black grins.

"Zo *n* **s** *ma* **x** *as* **k d** *i* **t!"** one gnashed.

"Floa *x* **ak** *dit* **!"** another gnawed.

" *Lo* **ct** *d* **it!"** yet another growled.

"Li *p* **!"**

"C *lu* **nst!"**

"Po *chle* **upp!"**

"B *lon* **zupp!"** they began chanting as they zoomed towards the watching heroes, **"Blo** *nzu* **pp! Blonz** *up* **p!"**

Three of the purple nega-wisps merged with Tails, Sonic, and Rock, the latter's armor turning a deep purple all over.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: PURPLE FRENZY

Rock nearly doubled over at the feeling he got. There was power in the weapon, sure, but there was also a need. A need to destroy. To rampage until everything in sight lay broken before him.

"Yo, bro, you okay?" Sonic asked with some worry.

"Fine," Rock shook his head clear and looked out over the chamber again. He supposed it was fortunate that everything in sight was something he'd want to break anyway.

"Then let's go!" Sonic yelled as he led the jump over the ledge to the area below.

Four voices yelled out "FRENZY!" and only sounds of total destruction followed.

"Go again?" Roll asked sweetly, holding the practice sword at her downed opponent.

Bass groaned from the floor of Sword Man's dojo and seriously contemplated saying he'd had enough.

"Ey, boss man, youse get da special package we sent ya?" Cubot asked as the surveillance cameras of the Asteroid Coaster followed the rampant destruction of the five remaining intruders. Cries of "FRENZY!", "VOID!", and "BOMB!" periodically emanated from the speakers, heralding more destruction of the facilities and their defenses.

"Yes," Eggman pinched the bridge of his nose on the other end of the communication after hearing Cubot's latest voice chip. "Though I

seem to be missing a few from the collection..."

"My apologies, boss," Orbot interjected, "but the last three are... proving a bit more problematic. Are you sure we can't send you some that we already have in custody?"

"No..." Dr. Eggman insisted. "That upstart Albert wants to send those things against me, then I'll respond by using the hapless pilots he enlisted to power my response and no others! That'll prove who's the real genius! Now get on it and don't come back until you have them!"

"And da Mega Copper an' 'is partners?" Cubot asked.

"You had your chance," Eggman folded his hands together in front of his face. "Let Frigate Skullian take care of them..."

"Hold it right there, Nega!" Silver declared as the allied groups burts into the launch chamber.

"Hohoho!" Eggman Nega laughed from his seat in the cockpit of the Egg Destroyer rocket, a seat in the rocket's fore section, just behind a stylized head in Nega's own image that was the rocket's tip. "You're too late! With the power of the Master Emerald card, I've gathered enough energy to turn the entire planet into a card! After a lifetime of being denied my recognition as the world's most brilliant mind due to Eggman's legacy tainting my heritage, I was finally set to erase him and his failures from history and take my rightful place! But thanks to your meddling I cannot change the future how I want, so I'll destroy it entirely! Ohohohohoho!"

"You're even more insane than I thought," Quint stated bluntly.

"EGG DESTROYER LAUNCH IN T MINUS TWENTY SECONDS."

"Metal Sonic!" Nega declared, drawing everyone's attention to the robot hedgehog in the room. "Keep them busy until launch!"

"If I must, you waste of air," the creation intoned before launching itself at the gathering who had already taken combat stances. "I shall come for you soon enough..."

Metal Sonic launched himself at the group at the same time a blur hurtled over them and straight at the robot. With a crash of metal, Sally slammed Extreme Gear first into Metal Sonic's Black Shield.

"EGG DESTROYER LAUNCH IN T MINUS TEN SECONDS."

"Go!" Sally ordered as she slashed at Metal Sonic with her wrist-mounted energy blades the moment his barrier dropped. "Stop the rocket!"

"NINE."

"You are determined to die first, aren't you?" the robot intoned rhetorically.

"EIGHT."

"I can–" Sally blocked the robot's clawed swipe.

"SEVEN."

"–handle Metal Sonic!"

"SIX."

"Well, actually Sal," Bunnie began, "we got a message that–"

"FIVE." the engines on the rocket flared to life, and everyone who was expecting it to blow up from sabotage got worried when it seemed to work just fine.

"That doesn't look sabotaged to me..." Shadow's eyes narrowed as Sally parried another attack from Metal Sonic.

"FOUR."

"Ohohoho!" Nega laughed. "As if anyone could sabotage my genius!"

"THREE."

Nega held up three cards in his hand and grinned like a maniac. "By turning these cards to the final energy needed–"

"TWO."

"–the world will be mine!" Nega finished with a boomingly insane laugh.

"Rouge! Treble!" Shadow growled as he recognized two of the cards.

"Amy!" Antoine and Bunny gasped on recognizing the third.

"ONE."

"Nice knowing you! Ohohoho!"

"CHAOS CONTROL!" Shadow yelled as he formed a bubble around himself and seven of his allies, Sally Acorn being just too far away to include, and warped them onto the rocket.

"EGG DESTROYER LAUNCH."

As the flames burst out of the rocket's engines, Metal Sonic raised his Black Shield and Sally formed a large bubble of null gravity that the held the fire at bay. Both combatants glared at each other across the flames as the Egg Destroyer climbed up out of the Meteor Base and towards its destructive purpose.

Tails's form of a black orb with glowing dark pink eyes and a jagged mouth, with two burning fuses, plummeted towards the last guardian barring the way towards the generator area. Despite their wholesale destruction of capsules holding the various wisps, they had found no sign of Yacker or the other color master wisps.

The giant mechanical eye with orange-hot barriers and a gravitational field was blown to smithereens on contact and Tails emerged from the destruction unscathed with the black wisp trailing him.

"Fe *e* **m, fa** *xa* **fu** *p* **p!"** the black wisp chortled as the door out opened up and the others joined them.

Jumping down, the group passed by a series of rapidly opening blast doors until they landed in a chamber that would lead to the exterior area where the generator was.

A chamber which was apparently the hangar for a weapons platform held aloft by a pair of skull-like dirigibles with glowing acid-green eyes.

"Take cover!" Rock yelled as the craft opened fire on all of them, ducking behind a stack of large metal crates, swiftly joined by the others.

"Okay," Sonic began as the hangar was swiftly filled with bullets and explosions, "now what do we... why are you stretching?"

"Calibration of my servos to make sure nothing slips out of alignment during high activity," Rock replied.

"So..." Sonic began doing a few stretches himself, "pretty much the same reason I do them."

"Close enough," Tails shrugged in his own stretch, ignoring the odd eyeless looks from the black wisp and the two remaining color masters. (40)

"Okay," Rock nodded as he finished calibrations. "Sonic and Tails, keep that thing busy. You," he pointed to the black wisp, "with me. And I'm going to need you," he pointed to the Purple Man, "to throw me and Violet Woman up and over that thing's weapons. Got it?"

"W *ha* **xa wha** *xa w* **hax** *a* **!** *W* **o ke** *nn* **axa** *fr* **ed w** *h* **ix a** *n* **!"** the black wisp cackled as he joined with Rock, turning the robot hero's armor blacker than the depths of space.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: BLACK BOMB

"Okay, we're on the rocket," Proto Man noted. "Somehow able to breathe despite hurtling through space and with a large number of defensive weapons pointed at us."

"Same ol', same ol' Sugah-Red," Bunnie grinned. "What say y'all take the ones on th–"

"I shall eliminate the defenses," Omega interrupted, several portions of his armor sliding back to reveal a rather ludicrous amount of barrels for a being of his size. "The rest of you eliminate Nega."

"A sound plan," Quint nodded. "Let's go."

"Hmph," Shadow smirked and dashed forwards. "I'll take him on my own..."

"You shall be needink to be fastair zan zat!" Antoine darted after the dark hedgehog.

"Hey!" Knuckles yelled as the rest of the group joined in the rush up the rocket towards the cockpit. "Save some for me!"

"Preparing to initiate forcible separation procedures," Omega intoned as he picked his targets.

"Please beware of the spikes on the asteroid coaster, they are sharp. Really? We have to warn people abo–"

Rock tuned out the P.A. system as he did his best to relax under the sheer destructive power now at his disposal, along with the urge to

burn and destroy everything around him, listening to Sonic and Tails darting about and distracting the latest guardian of Eggman's. "Now!"

"FRENZY!" the Purple Man yelled as he grabbed Rock and heaved him high into the air of the hangar. High enough to be out of the weapon platform's main firing arc.

"BOMB!" Rock yelled as he began his descent, throwing a large round explosive as he hurtled towards the weaponized craft.

The explosion rocked the craft, causing a temporary halt to its weapons fire and Rock heard the sound of repeated Homing Attacks from Sonic and Tails as he landed on the craft and took stock. The craft was damaged, but still operational. And it was also aiming defensive weapons on the upper portion at him.

"VOID!" Rock braced himself against the pull as the directional singularity of the Violet Woman swallowed up the weapons fire that was meant for him.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" Sonic's call came right as the craft began to move towards the hangar's exit.

"BOMB!" Rock aimed straight for one of those glowing acid-green things, the domed tops designed in a caricature of Eggman's face, pistoning out of the skull-like dirigibles. The explosion blew a large portion of the hover device apart and the whole craft began to list dangerously to one side, but it not only kept moving, it began to pick up speed.

"FRENZY!" the Purple Man just barely landed on board and dug sharpened claws into the metal armor as he hauled himself up.

"A couple more good hits should do it," Rock noted from the crouching position he'd taken to stabilize his footing as the Violet Woman sucked up more retaliation fire with her weapon. "Then we can..." he trailed off as something from his copy chip scan registered.

"FRENZY!" the Purple Man ripped a huge chunk of armor out of the less damaged skull dirigible thing and the craft began to shake dangerously.

"Wait!" Rock called out. "This thing's got a..." he felt the system he'd caught with his still-going copy chip scan activate, "...self-destruct mechanism."

"What?!" Tails shouted out from below. "How big?"

"With its unspent munitions, big enough to take out most of this asteroid!" Rock called back. "I'm not sure we can get clear in time!"

"Aw, man..." Sonic's voice groused as the clang of another weapon emplacement falling off rang out.

Rock noted the Purple Man and the Violet Woman looking at each other for a moment. "What are you two thinking...?"

Rock's question trailed off as he watched the Violet Woman begin to glow with a deep violet light.

"No... No, you can't!" he protested as the Purple Man grabbed him. "It's too dangerous!"

"FRENZY!" the Purple Man jumped with Rock in tow, sailing a good ways away from the craft towards the exterior surface of the asteroid.

"What's going on?" Sonic asked as he and Tails skidded to a halt next to the two. "Do we have a plan or what?"

"Violet Woman is going to–"

"VO / D!"

***BRACKABOO** oooooooooooooossssshhhhh...*

The craft's explosion immediately reversed in on itself as a miniature violet-rimmed singularity sucked the entire blast in, debris and all. In moments, the singularity dissipated to show nothing save for a lone floating violet wisp where the Violet Woman had just been.

"You have proven to be quite the persistent adversary," Metal Sonic noted as Sally settled to the floor and took up a combat stance, her energy wrist-blades at the ready.

"You have no idea."

"I almost believe you," Metal Sonic intoned and began crackling with energy as a blazing aura formed around him. "But the same could be said of you in regards to myself. V. Maximum Overdrive: Engage."

" *Fw* **axa wh** *a* **x** *a wh* **a** *x* **a!"** the black wisp cackled as he and the violet wisp zoomed ahead of the group towards the generator. **"Zax** *at* **w** *ax* **as axaw** *ose* **mo!"**

"Still worried me!" Rock called after them, taking his time walking towards the generator.

" *C* **emo** *e* **n tre** *wpe* **kos!"** the violet wisp called back. **"Caxa** *tst* **a** *n* **!"**

"Did she just...?" Sonic turned to Tails.

"Call you slow?" Tails couldn't hide his amusement as he fiddled with his adjusted translator. "Either that or a snack."

"I think the first is somewhat less creepy," Sonic shuddered before turning back. "Hey! No one calls me–Look out!"

" *Wh* **u** *h* **?"** the two nega wisps whipped around just in time to be sucked up by Orbot and Cubot holding what looked like glorified vacuum cleaners.

"You let them go!" Tails yelled as he dashed forwards, Sonic and Rock following immediately behind.

"Sorry, can't stay," Orbot waved as the ground beneath the two opened up, allowing Eggman's lackeys to fall through.

"NO!"

Whoever had yelled did so fruitlessly as the trapdoor closed immediately behind the two and their prisoners.

"Remember to try one of our new Space Pops! All the flavor of outer space, with only half the radiation!"

"Damnit!" Sonic fumed as Rock pounded uselessly on the trapdoor. "Come on, let's go after them!"

"F..."

"No..." Rock's quiet voice forced the hedgehog to stop himself. "We... we still have to shut down the generator first..."

"F–F..."

"I know!" Sonic paced furiously. "That doesn't mean I have to like it!"

"FR... F–FR..."

"I'll get started on it," Tails took out his tools and flew himself over to the generator.

"F–FR... FR–F–FRE..."

Rock looked over and saw the Purple Man hunched over emanating barely contained sparks of purple energy, and realized that the color master had just watched the last of his friends snatched up right in front of him. Walking over, he reached out to put a comforting hand on the wisp-piloted robot's shoulder. "I'm so–"

"FR *E* NZY!"

The swipe of Purple Man's arm tore his fingers through Rock's chest armor like it was made of paper, hurtling the blue bomber backwards. (41)

"Ohohohoho!" Nega laughed even as the Egg Destroyer shuddered around him and the damage reports blared an insistent red and held up a few cards instead and looked them over. "In a few moments I'll have reached the necessary distance to turn the planet into a card! And even better, I'll have used the friends of my enemies to make it happen! Victory is mine! Preparing for full card energy conver–!"

His seat lurched violently as the cockpit module was struck multiple times in succession, causing the cards to fly out of his hand even as a flash of light heralded the depositing of a weight on his portly stomach.

"I'll just take these," Shadow the Hedgehog grabbed the dropped cards. "CHAOS CONTROL!"

Nega scrambled upright as the black hedgehog vanished and examined his control panel, and noticed something missing. *'What the?! The blasted rodent took the Master Emerald card too?!'*

Sally grit her teeth as she rolled out of the way of Metal Sonic's V. Maximum Overdrive charge again and watched it tear through another wall in Eggman Nega's Meteor Base. Wasting no time, she dashed in the opposite direction before Metal Sonic came back through the wall.

Just in time for his high energy aura to give out.

Sally took the opening for all it was worth and roundhouse kicked the robot hedgehog hard enough to send him flying while his systems recovered from the overcharge and activated her energy wrist blades

for a follow-up attack. Metal Sonic hit the floor hard, bounced, and recovered enough to flip to his feet and produce a copy of Sally's energy blades from his own wrists and meet her charge, their blades locking together.

Sally went for a double-kick to the robot's face, only to have him twist hard the moment her feet left the floor and throw her at a wall. She twisted acrobatically to land feet-first on the wall and spring straight back at her foe.

Rock fought to maintain awareness despite his protesting systems. The opening blow from Purple Man had left his systems at less than a quarter of operational integrity. And he was probably going to need every ounce left to just stay alive.

A nearby crash and a spray of rings resulted from Sonic's Spin Dash form being spiked into the asteroid's terrain.

"Okay, that's..." Sonic shook his head as he tried to stand. "That's gonna cost ya... All three of ya... As soon as the galaxy stops spinning..."

"Sonic!" Tails called out, abandoning his own charge and having also clearly foregone his work on the still-active generator.

"I've got this you two," Rock told his friends as, instead of following up on the attack, the glowing Purple Man began tearing up the terrain.

"Like heck!" Sonic protested.

"Yeah, he nearly tore you in half with his first blow!" Tails added. "We can't leave him under Eggman's control."

"Does..." Rock forced himself to stand, "does he look controlled to you?"

"FREN *Z* **Y! FRE** *N* **ZY!"** the color master wailed as he kept tearing up everything within reach in a berserk rage without rhyme or reason.

"Now that you mention it..." Sonic trailed off. "Still, you're barely holding together as it is, bro. What if your plan doesn't work?"

"Then you get to take my IC chip back to dad and say you told me so," Rock replied, his armor turning brown and white as he activated the Strong Arm weapon.

"...Good luck..." Tails offered as the damaged Rock charged straight into danger.

"F *R* **ENZY!"**

Rock ducked under the wild backhand swipe and came up to meet the follow-up clawed thrust with an open hand, catching the blow and interlocking his fingers with Purple Man's even as damage warnings flared despite the enhanced hydraulics matching the color master's strength. The first hand came back for another attack and Rock repeated the gesture, damage warnings flaring again upon immobilizing the second hand.

" *F* **RE–"**

The color master's berserk struggling was cut off by Rock slamming his forehead into Purple Man's own, right between where his horns sprouted.

"Cut it out right now!" the blue bomber yelled as he struggled to keep his hold despite his enhanced strength. "I know you're furious! Hurt, angry! Eggman's lackeys took your friends!"

"F–"

" *BUT THEY WERE MY FRIENDS TOO!* "

Purple Man's struggles halted so suddenly that Rock almost overbalanced and his bright aura of purple energy began to wane.

"I haven't known any of you that long, but you've all been the best. White, cyan, green, yellow, red, blue, ivory, orange, pink, gray, indigo, magenta, crimson, violet, black, and purple," Rock swore that if Purple Man had possessed eyes, they'd have blinked in astonishment. "Yes, you. You're my friend too, even after taking a chunk out of me. And I don't abandon my friends. Not to Eggman and certainly not to their own pain."

It was astounding how utterly and completely lost a face could look with only a mouth for expression.

"And as your friend, I promise you we'll get them back. We'll get them *all* back from Baldy McNosehair. I haven't let him get away with this kind of thing yet, and I'm not going to start now."

Slowly, the tension in Purple Man's limbs released and the color master sagged until his only support was a critically damaged Rock as the wisp-piloted robot convulsed like a sobbing lifeform. (42)

"About time!" Rouge complained as she was released from her card. "It was getting stuffy in there!" She didn't mention how embarrassing it had been to be caught off guard by Nega like that *again* as a newly released Treble gave a growl of agreement.

"Why couldn't Sonic have come to save me?" Amy pouted after smoothing her dress out.

"You're welcome, sugah," Bunnie gave the pink hedgehog a half-lidded gaze as what remained of the Egg Destroyer turned to lock the planet below into its sights. "Now how 'bout helping us out here afore Nega traps Sonic and everyone else in his little ol' cards?"

"It's over Nega!" Quint yelled out as Amy was processing that with wide eyes, the green future-forged robot thrusting the point of

Sakugarne into one of the connecting clamps keeping Nega's control module attached to the rocket. The jackhammer spike cracked the metal before being pistoned forward and making the clamp explode.

On the other side, Treble gave a loud growl as he tore another clamp out with his steel teeth and Rouge broke another with a kick from her pointed shoes.

"Oh, all right!" Amy huffed and hefted her Piko hammer and followed the others in a charge at the damaged module, arriving last and giving a wide-arced upward swing that broke the remaining connections and sent the command module soaring away from the rocket.

"It's no use you fools!" Nega laughed as Silver's psychokinetic aura snagged the detached unit in its grasp. "I may not have the energy to turn the whole planet into one of my cards, but with my quick adjustments I can still turn part of it into one! Let's see how long it lasts with a chunk missing! Ohohohoh–"

In the same moment that he pressed the button, Nega glanced out of his clear bubble to see the tip of his rocket with the camera mounted there pointed straight at him before the flash went off.

A moment later and a card with a picture of the Egg Destroyer's command module containing Eggman Nega with a half-formed look of shock was floating through space. (43)

Sally was having trouble. She and Metal Sonic were too evenly matched with only the skills he'd stolen from her taken into account. Even if this weren't a baseline challenge run, the fact that most of Sally's higher-end skills gained in the Loops relied on NICOLE to work and since NICOLE was still out of commission... Sure, she could probably use her connection to the Source to enter her Super mode, but she still hadn't quite gotten that working right without something like the Chaos Emeralds to help the transformation. At

best, she'd need more time to concentrate than Metal Sonic would ever let her take.

"Surrender to the inevitable," the robot hedgehog intoned. "Your resistance is futile."

As it was, it was going to take a miracle to get her out of this alive. If only NICOLE were still able to help her...

Almost as if something had heard the thought, a form of purple, brown, and black coalesced behind Metal Sonic and raised a limb to strike. Before the blow could land, Metal Sonic had whipped around and sent a clawed backhand through the incompletely formed, and badly glitched, holographic body of NICOLE, shattering it into motes of light.

But his attention had been divided, and right then that was all Sally needed. A moment later and Metal Sonic looked down to see the blue energy tip of Sally's one freed energy wrist blade protruding from his chest.

"You... fi-ight hard..." Metal Sonic sparked as systems began failing, "to keEp yOur p-p-pAiNnnNnnnNnNnNNNnnnn..."

"No," Sally gulped in deep breaths of air. "I fight hard to overcome it."

It had taken the full contents of an E-Tank that Sonic had dramatically pulled out of his shoe and the entire ride back to Tropical Resort from the Asteroid Coaster, but Rock was back to full operating capacity.

"Please feel free to fill out a brief survey after your visit," the transport's announcer relayed helpfully as the four beings stepped off. "Your opinions matter to us. Unless you didn't have fun, then we don't care."

"Oh, go suck your own ego," Sonic made a childish gesture as he walked away.

"I wonder if that's what makes him so fat," Tails pondered as the last remnants of the five tractor beams connecting the stolen mini-planets (and one space fleet) to Eggmanland finished unraveling. "I mean, his ego's got to be high in everything that's bad for you."

"Ugh, that's a mental image I can do without," Sonic rolled his eyes as a subdued Purple Man gave him an odd look. "So when do you think Eggman's gonna try his final move?"

"Probably as soon as we join that party over there," Rock pointed at a group of wisps cheerfully dancing through the air.

"Sally?" Rotor asked as he answered the call made from Nega's own control center. "Why aren't you using NICOLE to contact me?"

"NICOLE's... recovering from a virus Metal Sonic infected her with," Sally admitted. "I think she'll be fine eventually, but it hit her pretty hard."

"If I've learned anything about her, it's that NICOLE's as much of a fighter as you are, Sally," the walrus offered a comforting smile. "But I'm sure that's not the only reason you called."

"No, I–"

"Proto Man to Princess Sally," another voice sounded out. "Come in, Sally."

Blinking, Sally connected the communication to the current call to Rotor. "This is Sally. How'd you know I was here?"

"We guessed," the blunt reply came. "Plus it's fairly urgent. The rocket's guidance systems were damaged in the fight and we need

help guiding it back to the Meteor Base if we want anything resembling a safe landing. Can you help?"

"This is Rotor, on line from Project Sky Patrol," the walrus answered. "If Sally connects me to the base's systems, we can guide you all home."

"Thank you. Proto Man over and out."

"Ohohohoho!"

"Ook! Zo Faxardupp Jesohaxail!"

The wisp party came grinding to a halt as a giant image of Dr. Eggman appeared above them.

"You all didn't actually think you'd won because you destroyed my generators, did you?" the man asked with a madly confident grin.

"Yeah, kinda," Sonic answered with an equally confident smirk. "You know how this works Baldy McNosehair. We kick your butt, you rant and rave a bit, try something desperate and then we kick your butt even more. Why not save us all the trouble and just surrender gracefully for once?"

"Cheeky little rodent," Eggman fumed for a moment, before grinning again. "But perhaps you haven't realized that this entire amusement park is in fact a mind control cannon aimed right at the planet below! One with enough energy to enslave the entire world."

"And maybe you haven't realized how much we've trashed tearing your park up?" Sonic grinned right back. "How much you wanna bet your device has a leak somewhere?"

"Er..." Eggman suddenly looked uncertain.

"I'd take dat bet boss," Cubot's voice cut in from the side.

"Oh, yes," Orbot added. "Especially since the system integrity reports came back positive."

"Er..." Now it was Sonic's turn to look uncertain.

"He's right Sonic," Tails gulped, dropping a pair of binoculars from his eyes. "There's no rupture in any of his towers..." the add-on of 'this time' was left off, though clearly implied.

"Ohohoho!" Eggman guffawed. "It seems I really do get to have the last laugh this time!"

"Last laugh?" Orbot's voice sounded puzzled. "How is laughing last special? Isn't that like being the slowest one to get the joke?"

The heroes (and a few wisps) stifled involuntary chuckles as Cubot's response was heard. "Yeah, I laugh last all the time! People look at me like I'm an idiot, forgeddabout it!"

"Oh, shut up!" Eggman roared before turning back to the heroes as the view panned out to show a lever rising up out of the floor in front of him. Eggman grasped the lever, but paused as he noted the calm gaze of Mega Man boring into him. "What? Nothing to say before I claim victory Mega Dunce?"

"Three things," Rock folded his arms pointedly. "First: Before even coming here, I was certain you were up to no good. Second: I've known exactly what your park is since facing your prototype at Starlight Carnival. Third: While Sonic and Tails seem content to leave things to chance, I prefer not to if I can help it."

"What did you do?"

"Pull the lever and find out."

Eggman and Mega Man stood and stared at each other for several moments, neither moving, blinking, or speaking.

"A superb bluff," Eggman grinned finally, "but all for naught. Because soon the world will have only one thing on its mind."

"What, boss?"

"Me."

And with that, Eggman threw the switch. The very next instant, the lights on his end of the transmission turned red and alarms began blaring.

"What?! What's going on?" Eggman looked around frantically as Rock allowed himself a victorious smirk as a massive nebulous cloud of purplish energy began streaming from the towers ringing the park. "Why is my precious alien energy being vented into space?!"

"Hey Eggface!" a new voice drawled as the image of Eggman squashed into half its original space to make room for a second showing the toothy grin of a certain green crocodile mobian. "How do you like them apples?"

"The Chaotix?!" Eggman stared from his end as the face retracted to show several others. "But... But..." (44)

"I'm sure you're aware of our agency's policy," Espio stated calmly, "of not acting against clients."

"Except that only applies to *paying* clients in good standing," Vector's grin only grew wider. "And you've never paid a cent. We have a *completely* different policy for that."

"Yep!" Charmy chirped as he buzzed around excitedly. "You know our policy!"

"T-The way we f-figure," Ray stuttered as he worked a calculator, "af-fter interest and-d-d-d f-false p-pretense fees and-d-d..."

"Suffice to say," Mighty concluded with a smirk, "one interstellar amusement park should just about cover it."

"YOU CAN'T HAVE MY PARK!" Eggman's face turned pure red in his fury.

"This is a recording, by the way," Shade added with a smirk. "We're already back on the surface."

"We aren't going to take your park," Vector's grin turned downright malicious. "We're, well," he gestured to the silent form of Sniper Joe who slowly pointed a finger gun directly ahead of himself and Eggman's face paled like it was pointed straight at him (45).

"Boom."

One of the massive outer towers exploded with a ***KABOOM!*** that shook the entire Tropical Paradise. An explosion that was repeated by the other outer and inner towers shortly afterwards.

CHAKABOOM!

CRACKABOOM!

SHOOMBALABOOM!

BOOMBOOMBOOM!

BABOOMTISH!

BOOMSHAKALAKALAKA!

BARACKOBOOMA!

The landing back on Meteor Base had been... Well, good enough for the passengers. Not so good for Nega's rocket. About the only thing that was still intact was the camera mounted to the front, which Quint had swiftly claimed.

"So you're not turning the Master Emerald back yet?" Rouge asked.

"Not until I get it back to Angel Island," Knuckles replied. "It's a lot easier to transport this way."

"Easier to pickpocket too," Rouge grinned.

"Please don't," Blues sighed heavily.

"You know, I wonder why the Chaotix's sabotage didn't do anything?" Silver wondered.

"Actually, from what I could tell, they didn't sabotage the rocket," Blues informed the hedgehog from the future. "Charmy probably mixed up clients again."

"Huh... Wonder what they did sabotage..."

"Sally?" Rotor asked from the open channel where he and the princess were hacking the base's systems to re-enter the atmosphere. "We may have a problem."

"What's that?"

"I located a section on the schematics labeled 'card collection storage'," Rotor informed her, getting most everyone else's attention. "Apparently, the chamber ruptured on launch and the contents were scattered. There's no way of knowing what, or who, was trapped in all of those cards, or where they ended up."

"It seems we'll have to find and release all of them before destroying Nega's camera..." Quint mused.

"Bet we can get more than the rest of y'all!" Bunnie challenged after sharing a quick glance with her husband.

"You're on!" Shadow and Knuckles accepted immediately.

"No!" Eggman stared in disbelief as alarms of all types blared in his office. "This can't be happening! It's not possible!"

In a rage, he kicked his hovering chair, sending it bouncing over the room, sweeping up a staring Cubot, dropping him off, and coming to rest right where it had been in the first place.

"Yo, whaddya mean impossible?" Cubot asked as his boss progressed to the sobbing stage of his tantrum. "Your plans've been crushed by Mega Man for several times longer dan I've been active. And when it ain't him, it's Sonic. Usually wit somma deir buddies in tow. Dey stop you like it's deir job or somethin'. In fact, I can't tink of a plan dose mooks didn't stop."

"What are you talking about?" Eggman regressed to the disbelieving rage part of his tantrum. "They haven't stopped *all* of my plans!"

"Name one."

Eggman opened his mouth, only to come up completely short. Even his initial takeover attempt, back when the bothersome hedgehog was still an inept child, had come to naught thanks to that horrid blue robot.

"I don't think I've ever seen the boss speechless. Nice one, pal," Orbot commented before slapping his compatriot on the back. Cubot instantly straightened stiffly and his head made a full rotation.

"Hey, thanks buddy!" the yellow and black minion replied in a high voice that was some terrible offspring of a squeak and a screech. "Hey! My voice... It's back!"

"Ah, the sweet sound my auditory processors know and love," Orbot seemed pleased as Dr. Eggman grumbled about remembering why he'd had Cubot's voice chip changed in the first place.

"But none of it matters," Eggman growled, his face gaining a manic look devoid of sanity as the rumbling of Eggmanland only grew in intensity. "I knew what my foes were capable of. I knew this kind of setback could happen. I may have planned for total victory, but I also prepared for just this kind of eventuality! My final weapon is ready

enough to remove the perpetual obstacles in my path! And once they're dealt with, I will deal with all of their allies in turn!"

Orbot and Cubot both gulped and backed away from their boss.

"I! WILL! CRUSH! *EVERYONE!* "

"Critical system failure!" the P.A. system announced as Sonic, Rock, Tails, and Purple Man dashed headlong up, or down depending on your perspective, the umbilical tether for the space elevator storage hangar. The one they'd ridden all the way to the park proper having been buried under the debris of the arrival hangar. "Repeat: Critical system failure! All attraction access is temporarily suspended. Please exit the park via the emergency exit ahead. This is all your fault."

"And I'm glad!" Sonic yelled back as Rock and Tails took out a small wave of flying something-or-others. He hadn't spared them enough of a look to tell.

"Less talking, more running!" Rock yelled. "Even with tapping the power cores in Eggman's bots to recharge it, the Sonic Speed master weapon is down to about a quarter full!"

"Keep up the velocity before things get terminal, got it!"

"Uh, oh!" Tails spotted another of the hermit crabmeat mechs gaining on them. "We've got company!"

"FRENZY!" Purple Man jumped back, landed on the mech, and proceeded to rip its head off. The mech lost guidance and dipped hard enough to impact the steel exterior of the tether. Purple Man jumped off and dashed to keep up with the others as the mech tumbled and sparked for a ways before exploding.

"Are you all sure you don't want me to stay and help fight Baldy McNosehair?" Tails asked as Sonic sideswiped a motobug into its

fellows for a rather impressive chain crash.

"Sorry!" Rock replied. "We need you to warn everyone to be ready in case the worst happens!"

"Yeah, because if the worst happens you'll probably need everyone!" Sonic added.

"I get it!" Tails huffed as they approached the hangar. "Guess it's better than being shoved into it unceremoniously!"

"Haven't I apologized for that enough yet?" Sonic called back incredulously.

"Nope!"

The group dashed into the space elevator hangar and spotted one ready to go.

"Okay, if I know Baldy McNosehair," Sonic and the others skidded to a halt shortly away from the transport car as Tails stopped in the doorway, "he should be just–"

The room shuddered with the sound of rending steel and Tails tripped the rest of the way into the transport.

'Great, even when I'm not shoved into this thing, I'm still shoved into this thing,' he mentally grumbled before looking up.

"Leaving so soon? There are no lines–"

And saw Eggman in his Nega Wisp Armor unceremoniously suck a recovering Sonic up one of the jagged-mouthed tendrils. The machine's mouth opened to display the Blue Blur stuck in a capsule at the back of the machine's 'throat'.

"–and I've saved the best rides for last!"

A sweep from the other jagged-mouthed tendril sent Purple Man and Rock slamming into the side of the transport hard enough that the movement knocked the recovering Tails back down. And then the first began to wind back for a straight shot at Tails himself.

"At least let me *stamp* your hand so you can come back in!" Eggman grinned so maliciously that the two-tailed fox found himself instinctively frozen in place as the tendril whipped forward, jagged mouth agape.

And then the purple form of the last color master was there between him and Eggman's attack, hands spread to catch the jagged jaws.

"FR–"

CRUNCH

Tails found himself staring in horror as the few purple bits of metal sticking out from the closed jaws of similar hue faded to a more plain steel. He felt some relief as the eyeless face of a purple nega-wisp poked itself out of a space between the jaws.

"L *u* **–"**

And then the wisp was sucked down the tendril just like Sonic had been. In the next moment, the doors closed and Tails felt himself rocketing back towards the surface.

Sonic suppressed the urge to simply smash his way out of the capsule as Rock hit the launch button on the side of the space elevator car. He could certainly do so. Whether he could do so easily might prove an interesting question, but he could get himself out of there. However, he kind of wanted to see how Rock handled Eggman's little wisp-powered toy. The bot was still at that stage of looping where his abilities weren't that far above baseline even when he went all-out. It would prove an interesting fight.

"You know," he heard Rock speak as the Blue Bomber readied his lemon shooter, "your attack should have made those amusement park puns sound threatening, but they still come across pretty lame."

Sonic fought back a grin at the mirror of his own usual taunt, as well as something else he was feeling as his capsule was connected to the Nega Wisp Armor's power systems. *'Heh... Interesting move Baldy McNosehair... Adding the Chaos Emeralds to your little toy as a backup. Too bad I can use that for my... nnngh...'*

"Cheeky little robot..." Eggman's sneer was audible. "Foiling my plans not enough for you? Now you have to foil the speeches I work hard on?"

"Maybe you should look into hiring a writer."

'Okay... That kinda... hurts...' Sonic thought as the energy he was connected to began to feel like he'd stuck his tongue, along with every other part of his body, in a gazillion electrical sockets. Like that thing Eggman sometimes used to drain Sonic's Super Mode, and awaken Dark Gaia by blowing the planet apart. *'But... he shouldn't... have... that... yet... right...?'*

"As if any writer I hired could satisfy my desires," Eggman scoffed as Sonic realized that the pain was killing his focus to the point that he'd be unable to actually execute any of his theoretical escape plans. "But I'll forgive your insolence this time."

'Sorry... Bro... You...'re... on... your... AAAAAAGGGHHH!'

"In fact–"

The pain grew to the point where it took all of the considerable willpower Sonic had gained over the Loops to simply not black out. (46)

"–I want to thank you, Mega Man!" Eggman laughed in his wisp-like mech. "You see, after your assault in Soleanna, I realized that I was going soft! I now understand that simply because some of my foes are *unwilling* to kill, that does not mean they are *incapable* , or that their tolerance has no limit! So from now on, I fight all my battles the same way: To the end! Kill or be killed! I hope you're ready, Mega Man, because the only way you'll ever stop me now is to do it *permanently* !"

"Wanna bet?" the Blue Bomber replied as he turned brown and yellow, manifesting a pair of circular saws in his hands the same instant and threw, only to have them bounce harmlessly off the deep purple machine's armor. Not to be deterred, the robot hero turned a deep navy blue and dark yellow before firing a different weapon.

"Ah, yes, your vaunted master weapons," Eggman grinned maliciously as he maneuvered one of the machine's tendrils to slap the Flash Bomb away, the explosive blowing a wide hole in the hangar doors. "I haven't forgotten them. I also haven't forgotten how you tend to have trouble using several at once. And with your faithful robo-dog currently back on the surface and my anti-teleportation barrier still fueled by emergency reserves, the only way you can move at decent speed is to use the one modeled after Sonic himself... So I hope you still have enough energy to keep up after all your running around earlier!"

And with that, Eggman's wisp-bot turned and flew out the hole left by the Flash Bomb, making it even wider in the process and still leaving not so much as a scratch on the paint. Swearing under his breath, Mega Man followed as fast as the mostly depleted Sonic Speed weapon would allow.

"Welcome back, Sal!" Rotor greeted as the hijacked transport landed. "How's NICOLE doing?"

"Recovering from whatever Metal Sonic hit her with," the princess ground squirrel mobian answered as she exited the craft, followed

shortly by the rest. "Slowly, but recovering. It'll be a while before she's back to a hundred percent."

"Well, I've got a quarantined mainframe set aside just in case something like this happened so let's hook her up and I'll see what I can do to speed her recovery."

"Thanks, Rotor. So long as there's not another crisis to handle, we should be fi–"

Rotor's handheld communicator started blaring an emergency message at that moment. As he answered and tried to get Tails to slow down before trying to tell him everything. Of everyone present, loopers and nonloopers alike, none could really say they were surprised by that turn of events.

"You just going to run away Eggman?" Rock taunted as he tore after the wisp-like machine along the outer ring of the space elevator shaft. If the madman was, it might prove to be a pretty effective tactic given the way his already depleted Sonic Speed weapon was only becoming more depleted.

"Perish the thought!" the man's laughter boomed from the machine's speakers, the canisters of stolen Hyper-Go-On waving rhythmically on the thing's back. "I just wanted to get a good pace going before I got serious! After all, this robot of mine is very special indeed! Not only is it invincible, but it can use the powers of your little friends better than those second-rate contraptions that hack of a scientist who dares call himself my equal made! Here! Have a taste!"

A sinister purple-violet aura oozed out of every seam in the robot's armor as its two tendrils ripped with jagged jaws positioned themselves like the flexed arms of a muscle man and the razor-sharp jaws of the gigantic head that was the main body gnashed dangerously. Eggman himself sat in the forehead just over the machine's two monstrous eyes, beneath the middle of five spiked crests, that his personal craft had been slotted into.

"FRENZ *Y* **!"**

'Oh, that's *not good...'* Rock thought to himself as the middle crest slid over Eggman's craft like armor and the jaws on the end of each tendril opened wide.

"C *U* **BE!"**

A rapid-fire series of deep purple-violet energy blasts shot straight up from the tendrils, before crashing down as fully formed solid-energy cubes with maliciously glowing cores in random spots along Rock's path.

'Okay, the only vulnerable spot is going to be his personal craft,' Rock analyzed as he sidestepped the cubes and began charging his Mega Buster. *'And I'm going to have to knock that covering back before I can even hit it.'*

Coming out from the mini-maze of energy cubes, Rock saw the mouth of the wisp-mech opened wide and the head tilted back.

"SPI *K* **ES!"**

A spread of three spiked energy balls popped out and began bouncing their way towards him. Followed by another.

'If Eggman's armored his craft enough, I likely won't kill him but this will be a longer fight than I want,' Rock grimaced as he jumped over the first spread and slid under the second even as the machine fired a third. *'But if he hasn't, then I could really kill him. Despite what he seems to think, I don't* want *to kill him this time, I'd really prefer to never kill anyone, but...'*

Jumping over the third spread, Rock set his features determinedly and noted the dangerously low levels his Sonic Speed weapon was reaching.

'But if that's what happens,' he added as the jawed tendrils aimed themselves at either side of him and began charging, *'I have friends to help me through it.'*

"HY *P* **ER!"**

Rock kept to the dead center between the two massive purple-violet buster shots, the heat from their backwash scorching him on each side, and emerged intact and only slightly ruffled. Taking aim, he fired his charged shot on the spiked crest over Eggman's cockpit, intending to follow it with several normal shots during the opening, only to have one of the tendrils block the shot while the other opened and took aim.

" *L* **ASER!"**

Rock jumped over the sinisterly hued laser beam as it carved from side to side even as the other tendril moved to follow with an identical attack that he jumped over as well.

'Come on...' he growled to himself, charging his buster again. He realized that he was going to have to find a way to get a lot closer to the machine if he was going to do any damage to it. And his time in which to do so was running out. *'Give me something to work with...'*

One of the jawed tendrils reared back like a prize fighter going for a haymaker as purple energy began wreathing itself around the already dangerous tip.

'That'll work...' Rock narrowed his eyes and prepared for a very precisely timed maneuver.

"DRI *L* **L!"**

Wreathed in a spinning drill of sinister energy, the tendril shot straight for Rock...

...who jumped the attack and landed on the tendril arm to run straight up it as fast as his Sonic Speed weapon would allow.

Inside one of the containers on the wisp-mech's back, an argument was taking place.

"Vaxayfo dib wo axarr pusk tegothol, wo vidd fo axafro te kot eno eb us uk, se dit skeurd fo ug!"

" *J* **e! F** *ro* **ur** *d* **it, u** *g wh* **axav** *o t* **e** *k* **e w** *ho* **rp z** *o* **wh** *o* **le u** *g* **ch** *uff* **eln rit** *tr* **o...!"**

"Yeep dewol dis zo eno–" the container they were in shuddered as Rock body-slammed the tendril joint. in the next moment, he'd jumped off towards the central spiked crest.

"Ch *e* **p axa** *lg* **uick Y** *ax* **angs-** *pit* **-ret! Di** *b* **axa** *nye* **no** *k* **ots u** *k* **, d** i **t n** *ud u* **g!"**

A hard kick to the crest forced it back, exposing Eggman's cockpit even as Rock used the recoil to send him directly in front of the clear dome, allowing him to look the Eggman in the eye from point blank range right before he fired.

"Haxa–" the containment field holding the wisps in flickered for an instant as Rock's charged shot slammed into Eggman's cockpit and the wisp speaking was shoved out through the momentary opening by the eyeless purple nega-wisp he was arguing with.

"Z *o* **w** *h* **ole jo** *o* **ds** *u* **g** *v* **elo** *za* **xan** *wh* **o** *pe* **os v** *o* **... O** *s* **po** *cii* **o** *x d* **ib w** *ho nu* **d ke** *ic* **k te sa** *x* **a** *v* **o w** *ho* **l..."**

Rock watched as the giant wisp machine tumbled and scraped along the ground at high speed as Eggman lost control of the craft. But it was otherwise unharmed. And with the Sonic Speed weapon critically low, he wasn't going to be able to keep this up much lon–

A familiar white blue slammed into him and merged with his body, turning his armor pure white.

MASTER WEAPON ENHANCEMENT MODE: WHITE BOOST

Blinking, Rock's surprise almost let the opening pass, but instead he grinned and shot forward with a burst of immense speed. Wreathed in a blazing white aura of energy, he slammed into the wisp machine and sent it careening across the metal plating even as the white wisp Yacker popped out of his body and moved to fly alongside him.

MASTER WEAPON: SONIC SPEED RESTORED TO NORMAL

Taking quick stock of his systems, Rock was surprised to note that not only had Yacker temporarily enhanced his Sonic Speed weapon, he'd somehow refilled the weapon energy as well.

"Kloaxat whole! Vupp blioct! Ug whaxavo te whorp!" Yacker pleaded as Eggman recovered control of his machine.

"Pum gned," Rock promised. "Pum'rr kot yeep bliocts uk eb zolo. Pum plemiso."

"Jet quich zom!" Yacker's tone was supremely worried. "Ug whaxavo te saxavo vem! Who tulnow whol dinke... dinke..."

"That's your *mom* ?!" Rock asked incredulously. (47) "He roboticized your mom?!"

"Yos..."

"Okay," Rock's face hardened once more as he made internal adjustments to his Mega Buster. "Don't worry. I know just what to do..."

MEGA BUSTER CONFIGURATION MODE: SONIC SHOT

Eggman fumed as he righted his special Nega Wisp Armor. Roboticized from a very, very, special alien wisp indeed. Taking stock, he saw a log of a minor interrupt on the containment field, resulting in the loss of one of his weapon options.

HYPER POWER OFFLINE

He entertained the idea of harvesting more wisps as he set the cockpit shielding back in place, but a quick scan showed that the little batteries were staying far away from the fight between him and Mega Man. So be it. With both the innate power of the special alien he'd roboticized and the Chaos Emeralds as a backup, he had more than enough energy for his purposes. And plenty more powers to unleash on the blue menace.

"Let's see how you like this one!" the madman grinned as he took aim and mashed a button. The pest had gotten a lucky shot in, but it would take more than that to defeat his masterpiece!

"BO *M* **B!"**

Rock sidestepped around the purple-violet energy bomb and timed his jump just as it went off, allowing him to ride the shockwave in a way that boosted his jump straight at the center spiked crest keeping Eggman's cockpit shielded.

"H *O* **VER!"**

A shimmering purple-violet barrier sprang up around the machine, but Rock didn't impact the field due to the mech suddenly picking up speed and backing away from his charge. Landing in a run, the Blue Bomber scowled at his opponent.

"Jed haxat?" Yacker asked.

"Jed wo waxait bel whix te vaxako pit vichaxako," Rock replied as the jaws on the ends of the tendrils opened up and took aim.

"LIG *H* **TNI** *N* **G!"**

The two bolts of dark purple-violet electricity shot out to either side of Rock and began to close in from both sides. Not wasting a moment, Rock vaulted sideways over the one on his right and continued running as he landed.

" *B* **URS** *T* **!"**

The massive gout of purple-violet flames that shot out of the mech's mouth almost took Rock off guard, but he was just able to sidestep the blast.

"R *O* **CK** *E* **T!"**

The two rockets came out the same sinisterly glowing color as everything else the machine had shot at him so far and Rock quickly dashed to the other side of the hull area, almost far enough to hug the slight wall, to dodge them even as the mech raised one of its tendrils in a clear move for an overhead slam.

" *Q* **U** *A* **K** *E* **!"**

Instead of dashing back into the center of the path as the massive metal tendril came down with clear intent to crush him, Rock took a page out of Sonic's playbook and ran up the short wall instead, and then jumped off right before the appendage slammed into the hull with enough force to cave it in. With a sideways flip, Rock landed on the tendril and dashed up it just like before.

"Oh, no you don't!" Eggman yelled out, yanking the tendril back to disrupt his foe's footing.

Rock however, used the retraction to push off in a forward leap, somersault, and impact with the machine's 'shoulder' area with both of his oversized armored feet. Pushing off as the machine reeled from the force of the impact and charging his arm cannon, Rock went into a roundhouse kick at the central spiked crest that knocked

it back from protecting Eggman's cockpit. Using the recoil, he spun around as he descended until he was looking Eggman straight in the eye before he unleashed the fully charged Sonic Shot straight at the man's cockpit.

"Ke!"

"Je, ug ke!"

"Ug bilch! Pum'rr berred!"

"Fu–" The containment field flickered right then as Mega Man's shot hit home and the first wisp took the opportunity to shove the second out.

"Now Yacker!" Rock yelled as he spotted another wisp flying out of the containers on the thing's back. A green one.

"Legol!" Yacker saluted before merging with the running robot.

MASTER WEAPON ENHANCEMENT MODE: WHITE BOOST

Charging forward in a blazing white aura, Rock body-slammed the machine the same as before, sending it careening across the improvised raceway before Yacker disengaged.

MASTER WEAPON: SONIC SPEED RESTORED TO NORMAL

As the green wisp joined Rock's side, he spotted a third wisp flying out of the machine right before Eggman was able to regain control and right it again.

"Terd ug Pum'd berred!" the gray wisp eye-smiled at the green one as she joined the entourage trailing Rock.

"Alright!" Dr. Eggman snarled as he wrestled his machine upright and looked at the display.

HOVER POWER OFFLINE

QUAKE POWER OFFLINE

"You want to play it like that? Then try this next one on for size! This is the final act, Mega Man! *Today the end begins!* "

"A *S* **TE** *R* **OID!"**

As the tendril lanced towards him, Rock entertained the idea of trying to jump on and run up it again, but the gravitational field in the tendril's open jaws made him think twice. As did the field of metal debris circling it to present a wide field of danger above, below, and on either side. As such, the massive sidestep he took was the only real option. And when the second tendril performed the same maneuver, he dashed to the other side just as greatly.

" *V* **O** *I* **D!"**

Before the second tendril even began retracting, Rock felt the increased pull from behind as the gravitational field increased in intensity, becoming a miniature singularity that tried to pull him back into it as the tendril which generated it retracted.

Gritting his teeth, Rock pushed the Sonic Speed weapon harder than he probably should have to pull away from the singularity even as Eggman took aim.

"RO *C* **KE** *T* **!"**

Rock barely managed to keep his traction dodging the energy missiles the tendrils shot at him before the mouth tilted upwards.

"S *P* **I** *K* **ES!"**

Swearing internally, Rock jumped the first wave and felt the singularity's pull drag him back even as the pulsating spiked energy balls rolled under him. However, the pull was almost a blessing in disguise as without it, he might have landed straight on top of the second wave instead of with just enough time to jump it as well, along with the third. But after that, he was way too close to the mini-singularity to risk letting it pull him in further.

" *D* **RI** *L* **L!"**

Not even bothering to try and jump on the tendril, Rock sidestepped the first drilling strike as fast as he could, and then the second before the purple-violet singularity finally lost power and collapsed in on itself.

The next moment, Rock could almost swear that he heard the machine snort like a bull about to charge down a bullfighter as it positioned its tendrils like a pro wrestler about to clothesline someone on either side of them. Switching to his default charged shot, Rock began charging.

"E *A* **GLE!"**

Eggman's wisp-like mech became wreathed in a powerful aura as it shot straight for Rock. There was no way he could jump it safely, and the profile was too wide to sidestep.

So he slid under it.

"Ug saxaw haxat yeep dewol axarmech id!"

"Ug whaxavo te roaxavo bilch, bel zo keew eb eep who–"

" *U* **g t** *w* **e axa** *l* **o r** *oa* **xa** *v* **ick bil** *c* **h di** *b P* **um w** *h* **axa** *v* **o t** ***e*** **fi** *to y* **eep baxa** *co* **s e** *b* **b t** *e p* **e di** *t* **!"**

Coming out the other side, he twisted, jumped, and fired his arm cannon to boost him up even higher as Eggman turned his machine around to face him.

Re-equipping the Sonic Shot and charging, Rock collided with the machine's face in a snap-kick that removed the central spiked crest's protection once more before firing the Spin Dash-shaped bolt of energy at Eggman's cockpit.

Yacker didn't even wait for the signal as a crimson blur shot from the machine and merged with Rock the moment he touched the hull.

MASTER WEAPON ENHANCEMENT MODE: WHITE BOOST

Dashing forward in the aura of white energy, Rock almost ran face-first into a wild swing from one of the machine's tendrils. But he slid under that too and collided with the tumbling machine in a sliding kick that sent it flying in a manner normally seen at World Cup Soccer tournaments before Yacker disengaged.

MASTER WEAPON: SONIC SPEED RESTORED TO NORMAL

An indigo blur emerged from the wisp-like war machine on impact and the crimson and indigo wisps joined the growing entourage flying after Rock as he continued chasing Eggman down.

ASTEROID POWER OFFLINE

EAGLE POWER OFFLINE

Eggman fumed as he righted his machine despite the reports of systems starting to short out from the repeated Hyper-Go-On fueled impacts. Growling, the man started mashing attack buttons at random.

" *L* **AS** *E* **R!"**

The infuriating blue menace jumped over them.

" *R* **OC** *K* **ET!"**

Sidestepped this time. Almost casually, even!

"BUR *S* **T!"**

He slid under! Without even missing a beat!

"L *I* **GH** *T* **NING!"**

He didn't even bother trying to dodge as the blast missed him by several feet...

"CU *B* **E!"**

The energy cubes lined up on either side of Eggman's foe and gave him an idea.

"D *R* **ILL!"**

Wreathed in spiraling energy, one tendril tore down the narrowed path, only for his eternal foe to jump off the energy cubes themselves like that blasted hedgehog friend of his and evade the attack by a mile.

Practically ready to tear his mustache out, Eggman spied the button for the one power he hadn't tried yet.

'Alright... Let's see what this does...' he stared a hole at the image of his foe, and mashed the button with all his might.

"RH *Y* **TH** *M* **!"**

The wisp-like mech began emitting a pulsing beat and emitting little bits of the sinister purple-violet energy of its weapons. The beat messed with Rock's concentration enough to make it hard to

concentrate on running as he fought it. Enough that the first swipe of the machine's tendrils almost took his head off before he slid under it at the last moment.

'Fight it, Rock!' he told himself as he barely cleared the second swipe, stumbling for a moment on the landing. *'Fi–No, don't fight it...* Work *with it...'*

As the next attack came, he reached out his hand and, almost like he'd practiced the move, planted his hand on the tendril and jumped into a picture-perfect vaulting handstand.

'Go with *the flow, not against it,'* he realized as he pushed off with his hand and cleared the second tendril in a gymnastics maneuver that would have been the envy of an Olympian athlete.

Touching down, he curled in and launched himself forward in a corkscrew that threaded the small space between the lashing tendrils as they made another pass at the same time. One came around to try and spear him as he hit the ground running, but he gave a small hop and pushed off of it, reaching out to grab the other as it tried to hit where he would have been with a bigger jump and swung himself higher.

A tendril came from below like a cylindrical barrier for him to smash into, only for his backhand grab to bring him smoothly around the obstacle. An inverted flip had him ducking the other tendril's attempt to spear him in midair in a way that let him snag the other side of it with his foot and bring himself into perfect position to spring straight for Eggman's shielded cockpit. Tucking into a reverse somersault, he kicked out just as a tendril came up from below and shoved it hard enough that it hit the spiked crest over Eggman's cockpit instead of him and left the only vulnerable spot open for attack just as he finished charging his buster.

" *K* **ot ke** *ic* **k u** *g* **t** *w* **e! F** *re* **d** *z* **is ne** *ink ax* **ar** *loa* **xad** *up* **p!"**

"Pum'v keno! Ug cemick?"

"Yoaxah, yoaxah... Eh, wed, zaxat waxas swoo–axang!"

A yellow form emerged from the machine to join the group as Yacker moved to power Rock up... and one of the tumbling machine's tendrils lashed out in a wide low sweep.

MASTER WEAPON ENHANCEMENT MODE: WHITE BOOST

Jumping the moment Yacker merged with him, he blasted over the low sweep in a blazing white corona of power into a spinning roundhouse kick that caught the machine right below the jaw (48), sending it hurtling away and a bright magenta form rocketing out to join the others with him.

MASTER WEAPON: SONIC SPEED RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Haxat whaxapponow?" the newly rescued yellow wisp asked the magenta one as Yacker disengaged from Rock.

"Faxardupp Jesohaxail waxankow te vaxako vo taxako eno raxach sket axat zo daxanco vaxachol wholo..." the magenta wisp looked sheepish as she joined Rock's entourage.

DRILL POWER OFFLINE

RHYTHM POWER OFFLINE

"That's it..." Dr. Eggman growled low and dangerously as the warning lights flashed more insistently. "You think you're so clever being able to avoid any one power I throw at you, let's see you handle two at once!"

Slamming his fist down on a big red button, more warnings began to blare.

WARNING: WISP POWER UNIFICATION SYSTEM UNTESTED

"Oh, put a sock in it!" the mad scientist snarled as he overrode the system and renewed his assault. "One way or another, this ends today!"

" *B* **OM** *B* **! RO** *C* **K** *E* **T!"**

Rock nearly tripped when he realized Eggman's mech was combining weapons, but even exploding with great force, the rocket projectiles weren't much harder to dodge than the normal rocket shots.

"Okay, Baldy McNosehair!" Rock yelled at the machine as he kept running, his wisp entourage in tow. "You want to throw out some new moves? *Let's see what you got!* "

"As you wish!" the madman screeched back.

"VOI *D* **!** *C* **UBE!"**

Two energy cubes shot straight up out of the tendrils' jaws and slammed down behind Rock before pulsing with a high gravity field that attempted to pull him back towards them.

"S *P* **IKE** *S* **! BURS** *T* **!"**

Only one spiked energy ball emerged, but as it rolled towards Rock, it left a trail of hungry purple-violet flames. Sidestepping it put him directly into the path of one of the two follow-up shots that rolled along either side of the burning trail left by the first. It wasn't until the spiked ball was almost on top of him that the flame trail of the first died down enough for him to barely sidestep certain doom just as the void cubes dissipated.

"C *U* **BE! LAS** *E* **R!"**

A series of energy cubes shot out to form a narrow corridor before they began shooting a laser from one to the next in an interconnecting web that Rock was going to have to traverse. Thinking quickly, he hopped up and jumped along the upper edges over the deadly beams below.

" *R* **OC** *KE* **T! LI** *GH* **TNIN** *G* **!"**

A pair of rockets shot out as Rock passed the laser gauntlet, a crackling field of purple-violet electricity between them clearly meant to take Rock's head off. Or rather to incinerate his torso, leaving a head and legs behind with nothing in between. He slid under the electric field by reflex and felt the static field as it passed far too close for comfort.

"L *A* **SE** *R* **! L** */* **GHTN** */* **NG!"**

The two tendrils came together in front of the machine's mouth almost like cupped palms and began gathering a massive field of energy.

"Yacker!" Rock yelled as he realized what was about to happen, prompting the wisp to merge with him.

MASTER WEAPON ENHANCEMENT MODE: WHITE BOOST

Sidestepping the massive blast and hugging the low wall as the backwash heat from the beam of electricity and light his environment sensors blaring. Ignoring them, he dashed forward in a blaze of white as Eggman's view was obscured by his own weapon.

"CU *B* **E! R** *OC* **KE** *T* **!"**

Jumping over the rocket-propelled energy cubes before they even finished forming, Rock slammed directly into the machine's shoulder to send it reeling as he charged up his arm cannon and disengaged the Sonic Speed Master Weapon.

MASTER WEAPON DISENGAGED

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: WHITE BUSTER

Using the machine itself as a stepping-stone once more, Rock maneuvered into a kick that exposed Eggman's cockpit just in time to look the man in the face as he finished charging and let loose a white Sonic Shot half again as large as Rock himself was.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

Yacker popped out as the machine crashed and tumbled along, three colored blurs comprising the orange, cyan, and pink wisps joined his still growing assemblage.

"Armech! Whit whix axagaxain!"

LASER POWER OFFLINE

ROCKET POWER OFFLINE

SPIKES POWER OFFLINE

"I'M NOT THROUGH YET!" Eggman roared as he righted his machine and mashed buttons.

"BU *RS* **T!** *L* **IGH** *TN* **ING!"**

'Scrap it!' Rock swore internally as he dodged through the storm of sinister lightning and fire solely upon reflexes he was sure he hadn't possessed prior to meeting Sonic and his friends. *'I was* sure *that would have done the trick!'*

"Haxat nud dreck?"

"V *OI* **D!** *LIGHT* **NING!"**

"Pum gned ug axarr saxaid eno velo, fut Pum zeugh zaxat eno weurd whaxavo foon oneugh... Pum..." Rock explained as he hugged the opposite side of the hull path from the electrically crackling void projectile. "Pum'v axablaxaid dib Pum pe axanupp velo Pum vidd whult yeep vem..."

The gathered wisps went dead silent at his words while Eggman kept up the attack.

" *BU* **RST!** *BO* **MB!"**

Rock dashed to the opposite side as the energy bomb erupted into a massive pillar of flames.

"LIG *HT* **NI** *NG* **! CU** *BE* **!"**

Four energy cubes landed in front of him generating a cris-crossing electrical field that a mighty jump at full Sonic Speed barely cleared.

"I... I'm sorry... but I..."

" *CU* **BE! BU** *RS* **T!"**

A large number of energy cubes were fired into the space above as Rock ran.

"Pe haxat ug vuch, whole," one of the wisps finally said.

"Ug'rr saxavo vem. Act yeep blioct," Yacker added before moving to merge with him. "Pum gned ug caxan."

MASTER WEAPON ENHANCEMENT MODE: WHITE BOOST

"Thank you," Rock said as he dashed through the falling cubes, each one generating a cross-shaped eruption of flames as it hit the metal hull. "I'll finish this. One way or another."

Charging his arm cannon, Rock engaged the White boost and weaved throught the flaming cubes falling around him in the blazing

white aura that was starting to become familiar.

" *C* **U–"**

Jumping with all his might, Rock hit the central spiked crest in a blazing uppercut that made the mech snap back like the head of a champion boxer's opponent before disengaging Sonic Speed once more.

MASTER WEAPON DISENGAGED

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: WHITE BUSTER

Looking Eggman in the eye, Rock unleashed the fully charged Hyper-Go-On enhanced Sonic Shot and sent the already battered machine careening away from him again before Yacker left his body, seeming to breath heavily.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

Re-engaging the Sonic Speed master weapon as the blue, ivory, and red wisps joined him, Rock hit the ground running. The machine was starting to smoke at several joints and he spotted a couple of flames starting in several spots as well. He had no idea what that might mean for the wisps' mother, but it couldn't be good. Still... Eggman wasn't going to back down, which meant he couldn't either.

"W *ho* **h...** *K* **ot** *'* **om Le** *ng* **..."**

CUBE POWER OFFLINE

BURST POWER OFFLINE

LIGHTNING POWER OFFLINE

"GRRRRRAAAAARRRRRRGGGGHHHHHHHHHH!"

" *V* **O** *I* **D! B** *O* **M** *B* **!"**

The burning and smoking machine righted itself and spat an energy orb that pulsed far more sinisterly than the previous bombs in the same motion. Easily sidestepping the wild shot, Rock pushed his Sonic Speed weapon to the limit as it detonated into a powerful singularity that dragged his breakneck run to the speed of a leisurely walk as Rock strained his systems to their limit.

" *FR* **E** *NZ* **Y!"**

Eggman's battered machine shot for Rock with its razor-toothed mouth wide open, giving the robot a clear view of the capsule that held a painfully convulsing Sonic within, intending to bite the robot hero in half.

Rock gave his run a momentary stutter-step that killed just enough of his momentum for a backstep that removed him from the spot where the jaws clamped down with a metallic snap. Reaching out, he grabbed the machine's upper lip and hauled himself into an upwards double-kick at the armor covering of Eggman's cockpit even as Yacker caught on and moved to merge with him.

Disengaging his Sonic Speed weapon as Yacker hit him, Rock charged up his arm cannon as fast as his systems could handle.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: WHITE BUSTER

The enhanced Sonic Shot blast caused a massive static discharge over the entire machine as the mech was sent skidding along the hull track yet again and three final forms emerged from it.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"Eh, vaxan..." Yacker huffed, actually looking tired. "Pum boor pit fit izzupp..."

" *Wh* **axah! P** *u* **m** *gn* **od u** *g ce* **ur** *d p* **e d** *i* **t!"** the purple wisp yelled as he arrived.

"W *ha* **xaha** *xa* **h** *ax* **a!** *W* **o axa** *rr* **gn** *od* **di** *t* **!"** the violet wisp added.

" *Yo* **axah!"** the black wisp cackled. **"** *U* **g, wh** *ol* **e, axa** *lo z* **o fem** *f* **!"**

'Heh... n-nice one... bro...nngh!'

BOMB POWER OFFLINE

VOID POWER OFFLINE

FRENZY POWER OFFLINE

"You... you..." Eggman twitched as systems sparked and smoked around him. "You horrid little robot!"

Then, suddenly, as if a switch had been flipped, all tension left Eggman's body. His fury having grown so great that he'd broken through into a state of total calm.

"You may think you've won, but I still have your horrid little hedgehog friend and the Chaos Emeralds as my trump card!" Eggman opened a panel with yellow and black caution lines to reveal a flashing red button in the center of very clear warning signs and mashed it like it was his hated foe's face. "You may have the aliens, but you have nothing as powerful as this!"

ULTIMATE EGG CHAOS CANNON CHARGING

"Let's see you stop this one!"

Eggman's wisp-machine was heavily damaged, flaming in places, sparking in others, and smoking in yet more, but that's not what held Rock's attention and caused him to skid to a halt. Inside the machine's throat, which halted to maintain its distance from Rock, were revealed the seven Chaos Emeralds. Each set around the capsule holding Sonic, who was writhing in pain as he flashed from his normal blue to super gold and back again, used by Eggman as a living capacitor for the Emerald's power. Rock stared as a ball of energy began to form in the machine's mouth.

"Eggman, what ar–"

And missed the flares of two barrels on Eggman's cockpit as they fired on him until he felt the pain in his legs.

"Argh!" Rock dropped to his knees as damage indicators flared from the small holes punched through his leg armor, one of which had shredded a knee joint by sheer chance.

"That actually worked?" Eggman's voice seemed surprised. "I mean, of course it did! I'm a genius! And now you have no way to avoid my final attack!"

"Ovolyeno! Zo whole joods eep whorp!" Yacker yelled as Eggman guffawed to himself and his final weapon kept charging.

'Careless...' Rock chastised himself.

" **L** id *d* !" came over a dozen replies to Yacker's call.

"At long last, I've won!" Eggman gloated as Rock grit his teeth.

"Arr tegothol jed!"

"You can't run!"

"Unrimitow Cerel!"

Rock was assessing his options when the familiar feeling of Yacker merging with him hit.

HYPER!

PRIMARY WEAPON OVER–

And then another one, somehow without dislodging Yacker.

LASER!

ERROR: PRIMARY WEA–

And another.

DRILL!

ERROR: PRIMAR–

Another.

BURST!

ERROR: PR–

"No Sonic to bail you out, because he's acting as my weapon's focus!"

Again, and again they came.

ROCKET!

ERROR

CUBE!

ERROR

SPIKES!

ERROR

HOVER!

ERROR

"Even your little alien friends can't save you now!"

EAGLE! ASTEROID! LIGHTNING! RHYTHM! QUAKE!

'Wh-What's...' he tried to shut out the error messages as he watched his armor flicker from color to color at a rapid and constantly increasing pace.

"At long last!"

VOID! FRENZY! BOMB!

ERROR ERROR ERROR

"This is the end of Mega Man!"

UNLIMITED COLOR!

PRIMARY WEAPON SYSTEM STABILIZING: UNKNOWN BUSTER CONFIGURATION

AWAITING DESIGNATION

Looking up as he felt himself lifted into the air, Rock swore he could see Sonic through the pulsing ball of Chaos energy mouthing "Do it to it".

'There's only one thing to call this,' the now-prismatic Rock thought as he aimed his arm cannon.

"ULTIMATE!"

"MEGA!"

The ball of Chaos energy grew in intensity as all sixteen wisps emerged from Rock's body, though the power they'd lent him not only didn't leave with them, it felt like it was still growing.

"EGG!"

"SONIC!"

Eggman's madly grinning face was visible as the wisps took up positions circling Rock in midair.

"CHAOS!"

"COLOR!"

Ten; the red, yellow, green, blue, pink, cyan, purple, violet, orange, and white (Yacker) wisps; formed a rotating circle slightly behind Rock. The other six; the crimson, indigo, gray, ivory, magenta, and black wisps; formed a smaller rotating circle slightly ahead. As one, they all pointed an accusing tendril at Eggman.

"CANNON!"

"BLASTER!"

The massive prismatic beam of Chaos energy collided with an equally massive and prismatic spinning ball of energy. The spinning ball of energy, almost as large as Eggman's entire wisp-like machine, halted as it struggled with the beam and began to be pushed back.

"Ohohohohoho!"

Rock strained his systems trying to Will more power into his blast, and actually felt something respond as the wisps circling him halted their movement and narrowed their differently numbered eyes in fierce concentration.

"EEEE **E** EEEE *E* EE **E** EEEHHHH *H* HHH!"

Incredibly, the spinning ball of energy Rock had shot began to grow, not only halting its backwards movement but beginning to push forward.

"That's... That's not possible..." Eggman murmured in astonishment as the spinning ball of prismatic energy, now larger than his Nega Wisp Armor, picked up speed. "IT'S NOT POSSIBL–"

The massive prismatic Sonic Shot slammed into Eggman's wisp-mech with a mighty flash of light that sent seven differently colored streaks speeding away towards the planet surface and the tumbling form of Eggman's cockpit/personal craft rocketing into the distance of space where it let off a fireworks explosion that formed a stylized image of Eggman's own face for some reason.

And there where the flash of light had been, looking somewhat worse for wear, was Sonic. And right behind Sonic, was a roundish pale pink form the size of Eggman's machine. One with three eyes, four soft non-threatening tendrils, and numerous bruises analogous with the damage the wisp-machine had taken.

"V **E** *M* !" came the excited cry as the field of energy holding Rock in the air vanished, dumping him unceremoniously to the metal hull below as sixteen forms happily mobbed the massive 'mother wisp'.

"What's up?" Bass asked as Ground Man's Whack-A-Mole (involving replicas of the household boring machines Wily had repurposed for a few of his past invasions) tallied his score.

"Oh, nothing," Roll replied. "Just a message from Rock that he beat Eggman again. Or rather 'Baldy McNosehair' as he's now calling him."

"Heh... Baldy McNosehair..." Bass chuckled. "That's a good one. I'll need to remember that."

"Tails?" Rotor asked over the communicator as the Freedom Fighters (and company) closed in on the looping fox's position. "How are things going?"

"I just got the message from Rock: They beat him!" Tails smiled.

"Hooray!" Tails was suddenly tackled on his end by an excited Charmy Bee.

"Ooooh," the non-looping Amy fretted in worry. "I just hope Eggman didn't set his place to self-destruct again!"

Freedom Fighters on her end of the call and Chaotix on the other end all *looked* at her.

"What? Oh, come on! You know we were all thinking it!" (49)

Dr. Eggman could feel his awareness fading and wondered for an instant if he probably should have installed those safety restraints like Orbot kept bugging him to. But the thought was drowned out by a more insistent and mighty desire: To crush his foes even if he couldn't see it himself.

"Heh... enjoy it... while you... can... pests... I planned... for... every outcome..."

Struggling in his critically damaged craft, he flipped open another emergency panel to reveal a button that had once been labeled 'in case of the unthinkable', only the 'unthinkable' part had been crossed out by someone, probably Orbot again, and 'inevitable' scribbled in its place. Using the last of his strength, Eggman pressed the button.

EGGMANLAND SELF DESTRUCT MODE: COLONY DROP ACTIVATED

"Oh... ho... ho... ho... ho..." Eggman managed to wheeze out before his world went black.

"Zaxant ug bel saxavick vupp stirdlon, jefro enos," the giant mother wisp intoned with minimal difficulty.

"Dit waxas jethick, vipt wisp," Rock replied, inclining his head in his best approximation of a bow given the current condition of his legs.

"You're enjoying keeping me out of the loop way too much here," Sonic tapped his foot impatiently.

"Why would you possibly think that?" Rock grinned as several of the wisps around them giggled happily.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because you–"

The hull they were on gave a creak and a prolonged shudder that would have registered about 4.2 on the Ricter Scale.

"Ang!" Yacker and several of his fellow wisps yelped.

"O *xp* **red** *ic* **k sic** *kur* **axali** *tio* **s!"** the nega-wisps swore.

"Vupp keednopt!" the mother wisp gasped.

"Is the space elevator supposed to recede into the ground like that?" Shade asked suddenly, gaining everyone's attention.

"I don't... think so..." Tails blinked as he watched the phenomena.

"Scans indicate the absence of any device capable of performing such a task," Sniper Joe informed everyone.

"But then... what could–" Tails was cut off as the ground began to shake, knocking most of those present off their feet.

"There a fault line around here no one told me about?" Vector complained.

"No, there shouldn–" the loud groaning and snapping of metal all along the height of the space elevator cut Tails off this time. "Oh my god... He's bringing the entire park down!"

"Okay," Mighty breathed deeply to center himself, "we need to stay calm and–"

"Run for your lives!" Charmy screamed before taking off at high speed.

"...Not quite what I was going to say, but close enough."

"Okay, don't panic," Sonic said as the vibrations of the hull increased in intensity.

"Zis dis zo dolbond timo te paxanic!" one of the wisps yelled back at him.

The space elevator shaft between them and the park suddenly splintered and buckled violently and the main mass of the park began to come closer.

"Okay, that doesn't look like it's going to end well..." Rock noted.

"Ma'am," Sonic addressed the mother wisp, "you take your kids and get as far away as you can. Rock and I will make our own way."

"Je, Pum wirr–eust!" the mother wisp's protest was cut off as she gasped in pain from one of the lingering injuries she still had after being restored.

"Yeah, none of that. Go." Sonic insisted. "Rock and I can handle ourselves."

"At roaxach rot vo pe zis bel ug..." the mother wisp said as she extended a tendril to Sonic and sent a flow of Hyper-Go-On straight into his body that left the hedgehog glowing like a nightlight.

"Thanks, now *go* !"

"Baxalo zoo worr," the mother wisp said as the other wisps gathered around her to help her zip away.

"Heh... You forgot that my legs aren't in great shape right now," Rock chuckled as the mass of Eggmanland grew ever closer.

"Nah, I didn't forget anything," Sonic grinned before he picked the robot up in his arms as if he weighed nothing. "Heh... with her little parting gift, this isn't even hard!"

"In the unlikely event of an emergency," the P.A. system informed as the hull around the group shook with increasing intensity, "please find the nearest escape pod. For anyone not named Eggman, your escape pod can be found back at the planet still being assembled in the factory."

"Hear that?" Sonic grinned as he bounded off their perch and down the outside of the space elevator towards the planet below in a blazing aura. "We just have to make it to an escape pod!"

"Just run you goof," Rock shook his head with a chuckle as the main mass of Eggmanland slammed into the broken edge of the space elevator shaft and began violently splintering the construct as it fell after them.

"I'm sorry, can you repeat that Tails?" Sally asked. "It sounded like you said Eggman's amusement park was *falling* ."

"That's exactly what I said!" Tails shouted into the communicator on his end. "It's coming straight down! And picking up speed!"

"But..." Rotor looked horrified as he performed some calculations. "An impact of that magnitude will be catastrophic!"

"I know!" Tails yelled back. "He's never done anything like this with it before! Granted, that might be because it's always collapsed into a Hyper-Go-On fueled black hole before, so..."

Pieces of the space elevator snapped off and were flung into space as Sonic tore down it at speeds well in excess of terminal velocity; jumping, sliding, and grinding as he carried his friend over, around, and through the broken pieces of space elevator hull. More than once he had to make a humongous jump as the section he was running down was snapped clean off the next one. But he kept running. If there was anything he knew how to do, in any timeline, it was run. And so run he did.

"You think the boss has gone crazy this time?" Cubot asked as he and Orbot piloted an escape pod away from the plummeting interstellar amusement park.

"That assumes he ever wasn't," Orbot replied calmly. "In any case, we have our orders."

"Man, this reminds me of carrying Elise all over the place," Sonic chuckled as he bounded across several broken pieces of hull to make the next broken section of space elevator.

"I'm not kissing you when this is over," Rock replied flatly.

"J *e* **!"** the violet wisp angrily slapped away the mother wisp's Hyper-Go-On infused tendril.

"Fut, haxat ug whaxavo focemo dis–" the mother wisp looked worried as she beheld the three nega-wisps.

"Gi *c* **t** *e* **b kle** *wi* **ck e** *n u* **s, ve** *m* **!"** the black wisp chuckled.

"Wo wolo axablaxaid zis vidd whaxappon," the red wisp rolled his eyes.

"Sko quich waxanks te whorp ug!" the orange wisp snapped.

"E *h* **, ch** *ub* **b** *d* **it!"** the violet wisp snapped back.

"Yoa *xa* **h!"** the purple wisp berated **"Di** *b s* **ko w** *a* **xan** *ks* **t** *e wh* **orp z** *o* **n sk** *o* **sk** *eu* **rd wh** *orp z* **o wh** *oleo* **s za** *xa* **t who** *rp* **ow u** *s* **!"**

"Pum axam sellupp, fut Pum..." the mother wisp trailed off and winced as her injuries once again.

"...Zon rot us," Yacker spoke up suddenly.

"Fut ovon axarr eb yeep Whypol-Ke-En cemfinow weurdniz–" the mother wisp worried.

"Zon wo kot ovolyeno," Yacker insisted.

"Ol... Haxat pe ug voaxan 'ovolyeno'?" the cyan wisp asked curiously.

"Pum voaxan *ovolyeno* !" Yacker clarified. "Ovolupp raxach wisp zoupp whorpow saxavo! Zoupp whorpow us, pi jed dit nud eep tuln te whorp zom!"

" *P* **um ri** *ko z* **is p** *ra* **xan!"** the purple wisp cackled as they all began speeding off in various directions. **"Pu** *m'v* **ox *cit* ow** *t* **e f** *o p* **it pax** *al* **t** *e* **b di** *t* **!"**

Sonic slammed feet-first into a broken piece of hull as it entered his path and rode it like a snowboard for a short ways before hopping off and continuing to carry his friend down the long elevator spire.

Dr. Wily was grumbling over the sixteen 'offline' reports his monitor insisted on showing him in regards to his Color Masters when one of the white wisp aliens zipped into the room and gave him a hug and a mouthless kiss.

"Fyo Claxazupp Wird-Whaxail!" the white wisp eye-smiled at the man. "Wo kettaxa ke jed! Torr zo nico Foaxald Vaxan fyo bel us!"

Dr. Wily blinked rapidly as the alien being zipped back out. "What was *that* all about?"

The atmosphere contained between the main shaft and the outer stabilizers helped Sonic and Rock transition safely as they hit the level of the atmosphere. The mass of Eggmanland behind them however hit the atmosphere and burst into an equally massive fireball as it slowly gained on the two.

"Oh Asimov..." Roll gasped as she saw something off in the distance hit the atmosphere and burst into flames. If her GPS was correct, that's where Rock... "That's..."

"Looks like one of Baldy McNosehair's eyesores," Bass commented as he peered at the object, likely with some zoom feature on his optics. "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"I think Rock's still on that thing!" Roll was practically hysterical as she watched it descend.

"Oh, is that where he was? Huh... Never thought about dropping a city on either of yo–ow!"

Roll glared at him with a fury meant more for someone much balder and much rounder.

"Geez!" Bass rubbed at a rather sizable dent in his helmet. "As if it would have worked if I had! I swear the two of you have more lives

than an army of cats!"

"Well, this Loop was fun while it lasted," Sonic said as the ground and the flaming mass of Eggmanland both grew ever closer.

"What, no crazy last-minute plans with slim chances of success?"

"Unless you snagged the Chaos Emeralds while I wasn't looking, this is it," Sonic chuckled as he kept running straight for the ground. "Maybe if I'd grabbed something from my pocket right off the bat, but now..."

"Too busy running. And carrying me. Got it."

"Really, I was kind of hoping for a wisp-ex-machina by n–"

"Ug caxarrow?" the familiar form of Yacker slid in next to them. Followed by several more of varying colors. Rock looked back over Sonic's shoulder to see thousands of wisps of every type, including nega-wisps, forming a network around the burning remains of Eggmanland as it plummeted after them.

"Riko vupp stirdlon lomictow vo," the form of the mother wisp joined them, "ug whorpow us. Jed wo skaxarr whorp ug."

"Oh wow..." Rock breathed in amazement at the sight as every last wisp, including Yacker and the mother wisp, began glowing, forming a shell of energy that Eggmanland slammed into... and halted.

"Dang impressive, ain't it?"

"Yeah..."

The burning mass struggled against the Hyper-Go-On barrier for a few moments, and then began disintegrating. Turning into nothing more than gazillions of glowing dust particles that floated lazily to the ground in a cloud.

Sonic hit the ground running and tore off into the distance, carrying Rock the whole way. The cloud of dust might be relatively harmless, but he wasn't in any hurry to breathe it.

Bass watched Roll teleport out. The moment she'd heard that her twerp of a brother was safe and where, she'd excused herself. Honestly, he supposed this not-quite-a-date had been fun and al–

"So, boy, what's the verdict?" the voice of his father/creator sounded from behind him. Damn but the old guy could move quietly when he wanted to.

"I think you're good to open pops," Bass replied without turning around. "This is a pretty sweet place you've got and it doesn't look like anyone's gonna kill themselves on the attractions. Well, no more than they might anywhere else at least. And everyone's gonna be lining up to throw their money at you so you can spend it on whatever hare-brained scheme you've got planned next. Honestly, it's going to be a shame to see this place scrapped in the inevitable dust-up."

"What makes you think that will happen?!"

"Uh, I've gone through this song and dance before? On both sides of the equation? Seriously, the betting pool on who'll be responsible has probably already started."

The party was in full swing all across Mobotropolis. Wisps of all colors were everywhere dancing and gibbering at anyone who caught their interest. Members of all known native sapient races had been surprised at first, but had gone with the flow.

The fact that they hadn't left immediately wasn't quite so surprising to Sonic and his friends given the lingering injuries the mother wisp had wanted to recover from first. What was surprising to them was the fact that a relatively small number, a few hundred (including three in

particular), of the nega-wisps had elected to remain that way rather than be restored to normal. There had been some concerns, but as things turned out, they really were just wisps of a different color. A bit more of a temper, some garbled vocals, and a decent prankster streak, but they were still the lovable wisps that the rest were.

"You really have to go so soon?" Rock asked the fully-healed mother wisp.

"Eb ceulso," the mother wisp replied, looking fondly over to where the brave sixteen former Color Masters were again performing a blow-by-blow replay of the daring rescue across Eggmanland and the stolen mini-planets the wisps called home. "Zis dis jet eep whemo. Wo caxamo wholo fupp axaccidonk pi pe jet foreck wholo um ug. Wo axapplociaxato axarr yeep whorp pi whespitaxaritupp poaxal wholeos pi bliocts, fut dit dis timo zaxat wo lotulnow te eep praxaco."

"Man but we're gonna miss you guys," Sonic added, still not understanding the words, but getting the general feel of the message anyway. "Feel free to drop by anytime!"

"Wo wirr!" Yacker replied as he zipped over, his part in the retelling complete for now. At the moment, the crimson wisp had taken over while the purple wisp acted out the part of one of Eggman's robots to cheers from wisp, human, and mobian audience members alike. "Fut proaxaso rot us binisk zis chelupp bilch, vem?"

The mother wisp looked at the pleading expression on Yacker's face and gave a sigh of concession. "Eh, molupp worr."

"Yaxaupp!"

It had taken them and their allies, plus a few hundred wisps excited about the possibility of a scavenger hunt, several days to track down and restore all the things Eggman Nega had turned into cards. All except the man himself. Silver and Quint had taken several hours

after the wisps left to make sure that no trace energy indicating a missed card could be detected before they declared the job done. (50)

"Well," Silver asked as he held out the camera to his friend, "do you want to do the honors?"

"With pleasure," Quint smirked, carefully placing the diabolical camera on the ground before him. With a swing of Sakugarne, the device was crushed to bits under the weaponized jackhammer. "There. It's done. That's the end of Eggman Nega."

"How does it feel?"

"It feels... good."

Far up in orbit, almost to the moon, a man drew his first breath in days. Gasping, the white haired man looked around his craft, dusting down his black jacket and red bodysuit.

"About time they destroyed the thing and set me free..." Eggman Nega grumbled. "Good thing I created that failsafe just in case. Even so, I was beginning to wonder if they were just going to keep it as a souvenir..."

The man began to grin in a way devoid of sanity or anything resembling it.

"Such fools they all are..."

Eggman groggily returned to consciousness with an aching everything.

"Wha... what happ...?" he trailed off as his extremely dry mouth forced him to stop talking. And his stomach rumbled like he hadn't eaten for days. Something smelled pretty bad too.

"Yay!" an extremely grating voice made his head pound in protest. "The boss is awake! Hey boss!"

"Shu... shut up..." he growled out. What had happened to him?

"Oh, my," a more sedate and tolerable voice made itself known. "I'm glad you're back boss. I was afraid you'd slipped into a coma for a while there. That was a nasty tumble you took. I told you your craft needed safety restraints after all. In any case, we pushed your damaged vessel to the coordinates you specified should you be incapacitated but alive. We've been waiting here for... A while."

Now he remembered... He'd lost, but it seemed his foes had failed to finish the job. Too bad. For them.

He tried to laugh, only to start coughing instead. "Egg... fleet... Decloak..." he ordered instead. His control panel lit up and a massive space fleet appeared all around his personal craft.

"Holy shamole!" the grating voice, Cubot, yelled. "Where were you hiding that?"

"Silence..." he ordered. "Get me... on board... Recloak... Water... food... clean..."

"And then, boss?" the less grating voice, Orbot, asked.

Yes, and what then? Which of his brilliant plans would he attempt next? He'd need to send a few 'polite' reminders to his enemies that he lived, but what then? Hmm... decisions, decisions... Ah!

"Bring me... the... Gaia Manuscripts..." (51)

---

1) Nor, for that matter, did anyone else.

2) Bass just took the words right out of my mouth.

3) C-c-c-c-combo!

4) That's right, Eggman's charging planetary-sized fees just to get in.

5) Mostly because Orbot's really not trying all that hard to aim.

6) Wait a second...

7) Having trouble? Try running it through this translator: mybigmonkey dot com slash gibberish

8) Well, after Sonic's lightspeed impact it read 'Welcome to Egg_land'

9) XP

10) Filraen: You'd think Sonic and Tails would learn to interpret spoken Wisp one of these loops.

Archeo Lumiere: It's different from loop to loop.

11) If you're familiar with the plot of Sonic Colors, you've probably got a sinking feeling right about now.

12) Well, what did you expect? His power is fire-based.

13) Is Sasuke in this Loop and no one told me?

14) Oh, right, him.

15) Me either. Ew.

16) Oh snap.

17) *Spittake*

18) You know, I wonder if either Captain Jelly or Candybeard was supposed to have a voice and it ended up being the temporary replacement voice chip given to Cubot…

19) Which was why three of the four weren't chasing each other all over the place while the fourth hid.

20) It wasn't her! It was the One Armed Woman!

21) Oh dear, someone's cover is blown.

22) You *know* I had to do this line.

23) That's... That's new...

24) Oh dear lord, it's worse... Orbot and Cubot are... *gasp* COMPETENT!

25) Oh good. For a bit there I was afraid there were two Eggmen. Well, I suppose technically there *are* ... so...

26) Yeah, Sonic's swimming prowess is just a step above that of a Devil Fruit user. Even after looping for so long.

27) wildrook: Okay, I have to admit, NICOLE is developing a sense of humor.

28) Time for some surfing music.

29) *sweatdrop*

30) *jaw drop* THAT WASN'T IN THE SCRIPT!

31) Of all the times for a villain to be perceptive...

32) Please be aware that some Arc Fatigue may be experienced. After all, we're only about halfway through this installment and we're already over twice the length of the previous installment.

33) Uh-oh...

34) Egg Pawns Can't Dance.

35) I'm honestly trying to figure out when this version of Metal Sonic became a militant nihilist. It certainly wasn't in my notes...

36) And it's a mental image that doesn't make one want to wash their brain with bleach.

37) And now I'm wondering under what circumstances Mogo (the living planet who is also a Green Lantern) would hire the Chaotix for a case.

38) This isn't just me pulling something out of my ass. Have you seen what a thick accent can do to voice recognition software? The only ones I've used manage to regularly botch my relatively normal speech.

39) And here I thought gibberish for 'big damn heroes' was 'fig daxamn wholeos'.

40) The odd eyeless looks that all said 'WTF are you doing?'

41) Crap.

42) It is worth noting that, in the timeline of the Mega Loops, Rock hasn't met the Equestrian crowd at this point.

43) This is classic 'Hoist By Your Own Petard' right here.

44) The dramatic reveal that most of you likely already guessed! Yes, while Eggman was distracting Sonic and Mega Man from his real plan by having them chase down and rescue wisps, Mega Man was distracting Eggman from the fact that he'd hired the Chaotix to sabotage his park by playing along.

45) Which, in his office, it was.

46) He had a chance. He chose not to use it.

47) If you're familiar with the DS version of Sonic Colors, you've probably guessed what I did here.

48) Tatsumaki Senpu–Oh, wait... Rock hasn't actually learned that move yet.

49) You know you were too.

50) You forgot about this, didn't you? Don't worry, I almost forgot about it myself.

51) As firestorm blade said on Spacebattles: Cherry bomb it (52) Eggman…

52) To the tone of "God **** it"

Mega Loops 14

Mega Loops 14

AN: In Mega Sonic Part 5, I forgot that ff dot net prohibited copy/pasting of story text. So at the end of this chapter is a collected translation of the 'Gibberish' speech from that chapter as a bonus.

14.0

Anakin held his lightsaber in front of him warily. General Grievous being replaced by someone he'd never heard of was one thing. Actually seeing what looked like a young girl in a black and beige armored sundress in command of the Separatist droid army was another altogether. Facing her down in the middle of her current command ship was... surreal.

"Are you... *her* ?" the disturbingly lifelike girl droid, as lifelike as Blues had been when he visited come to think of it, asked with an insane grin as every single danger sense Anakin had picked up in the Loops screamed at him to run for his life. Only the fact that his precognitive abilities were screaming just as loudly that bad things would happen if he tried kept him rooted to the spot.

"Her?" Anakin asked with not a little confusion. He was his normal male self this Loop after all.

"The one I need to kill," the girl droid said with a disturbing gleam in her eye. "To rend, tear, and torture until she begs for a mercy that will never come. Are you sure you're not her? Maybe her brother perhaps?"

"I... really don't know who you're talking about," Anakin resisted the urge to take a step back. "Maybe if you tell me their names?"

"I don't know her name..." the girl general giggled creepily. "Only that she exists somewhere and that she has a brother..."

"I can't really help you find them if you don't know who they are," Anakin stalled.

"Oh, well," the droid girl sighed dramatically before grinning maniacally. "I guess I'll just have to kill and torture everyone to be sure! It'll be so much fu–"

"General Waltz!" a droid soldier came running up. "General Waltz! We have intru–*skrzzt*"

Anakin blinked as the droid fell in several pieces from the lightsaber blades that had suddenly sprouted from the girl droid's *fingers* .

"What have I told you idiots about interrupting me when I'm in the middle of killing someone?!" the girl screeched before turning back to a thoroughly creeped out Anakin and igniting lightsaber blades from her other fingers as well. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes, I was about to tell you that if you really wanted to live you should start running for your–*skrzzt*"

Anakin stared in horrified confusion as the girl droid cut *her own face* with one of her finger-sabers.

"WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU ABOUT WARNING THE VICTIMS?!" she screeched at herself. "YOU DON'T WARN MY PRECIOUS MEWLING PLAYTHINGS AWAY AND I SOMETIMES PRETEND YOU DON'T EXIST!"

Anakin's resistance against his instincts failed as he finally took a step back, which caused the crazed girl droid to refocus on him, the neon pink 'W' in her helmet flaring with ominous light.

"WHO SAID YOU COULD LEAVE?!" she screamed and flung one hand and all five energy blades emitting from it in his direction, the

blades lengthening to score the armored walls of the hallway as she swung.

'Shit!' Anakin panicked as he jumped, curled up, and used the Force to push the energy blades up and down to create a gap he could fit through as they passed. His hair and the soles of his boots were singed, but he wasn't a few feet shorter on either end. He brought his own lightsaber around to block the next set with a downswing even as he used the Force to push himself up and over them. *'I hate full modulation lightsabers enough when there's just one of them!'*

And then he spotted the even more crazed and excited expression of General Waltz's face as she spun back around for another pass and his spirits sunk.

The assault was relentless and devastating. At least to the poor ship corridor they were in as deep molten gouges were carved into it with every missed, blocked, and deflected strike of General Waltz's, but the girl droid general didn't seem to care about the collateral damage to her own ship as she kept up the assault.

Anakin's mind was racing as much as the situation allowed. Most of his energy was being spent not getting diced to little smoldering bits in the next moment which left precious little to formulate a plan or try and counterattack. Any time he moved to try and turn the flow of battle, his danger sense, precognition, and survival instincts all screamed him back on the defensive. And forget trying some of the more powerful stuff he'd picked up. Much of it needed at least a moment of concentration that he couldn't afford, and some of the best stuff (most of which could have turned the entire ship into vapor easily) practically needed a heartfelt speech or a few seconds to charge up which was emphatically out of the question right then.

And then, practically through sheer chance, he spotted his looping apprentice charging up behind General Waltz with a massive swirling ball of chakra flames in her hand.

"Take this you monster!" Ahsoka prepared to strike.

"Snips, no!" Anakin yelled as his padawan jumped into the air and angled the swirling orb of flames for a downward blow.

"RASEN–"

Ten finger-mounted lightsaber blades flashed through the spot occupied by Ahsoka and the fire-based Rasengan variant exploded to incinerate the girl's remains before Anakin had even finished registering the sight.

General Waltz hadn't even turned around.

"Ooops..." the insane droid girl grinned. "Was she important to you? A student? A friend? A lover? A daughter perhaps? I always forget to ask that before I kill precious people..."

'Yes, yes, a few Loops I try not to think about, and YES you unholy blight on creation!' Anakin's face twisted with fury as Dark Side Force Lightning arced over his body.

"AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! THAT'S THE LOOK I LOVE TO SEE! FURY AND ANGUISH!" Waltz cackled as she charged again. "LET IT BE THE LAST THING YOU EVER FEEL!"

Anakin roared in anguished fury as he charged to meet her head-on.

Anakin awoke to the all-too-familiar sound of mechanically assisted breathing and looked around. This... wasn't the chamber where Palpatine told him Padme was dead. Nor was it one of his chambers after the Empire had been formally acknowledged.

Raising his arm up, he noted that as Darth Vader he most certainly didn't normally wear white.

"Where...?" the deep voice he was more familiar with than he liked asked.

"Easy Anakin," the gentle voice of Obi-Wan made itself known as the decidedly younger version of the man entered Anakin's view. "You've been through a lot. You almost didn't make it."

"Obi-Wan... I..." Anakin choked as what happened came back to him. It was still the same Loop, which meant Obi-Wan wasn't Awake and Ahsoka was still... "General Waltz... She... she got Snips..."

"Oh, Ani..." Padme's shocked gasp made his heart hurt even more. "I'm so sorry..."

"Do you remember what happened?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No... I..." Anakin tried to think, but everything after Ahsoka had died was a roar of rage and sorrow. "She got Snips... I... I lost it... and then... here..."

"Hmm..." Obi-Wan frowned in his classic manner. "Then we have a problem... When we found the ship adrift, you were the only thing even remotely alive on it. All of the droids, the crew, and everything else was carved to pieces but no sign of General Waltz was found."

"We can't..." Anakin tried to sit up, only for his vision to swim.

"Easy Ani," Padme lowered him back down gently. "You're nowhere near recovered."

"Indeed," Obi-Wan nodded. "We'll put a stop to General Waltz and whatever she or the Separatists have planned, but for now you need to rest and recover."

Anakin reluctantly heeded their concern, vowing to himself that by the time this Loop was over, Waltz would be put down like the madwoman she was.

"Oh, you look like a fun one!" General Waltz grinned as she stared down the white-armored figure of Anakin Skywalker in his billowing

cape. "Be sure to let me know where it hurts so I can keep cutting there!"

"You will not find me so easy an opponent this time," Anakin's distorted voice boomed across the distance between them. Despite the claim, he held himself in a tense stance. He'd only survived their first encounter due to his long practice with the Sith regenerative techniques he'd studied under Darth Sidious/Palpatine and his unquenchable fury at this insane droid girl.

"This time?" Waltz's grin grew like someone had told her it was her birthday. It really creeped Anakin out in ways he'd never openly admit to anyone. But then, anyone who'd ever met Waltz and lived wouldn't need such an explanation. They'd know the feeling first hand. It was the feeling that had led the Separatist leaders to try and replace their mad general with someone more stable. But Waltz was still the general, and the new Separatist leaders were too frightened of her, or still too nauseous from seeing what happened to their predecessors, to try that again. "You mean... You actually lived through me killing you once? I... I get to kill you *again* ?!"

Anakin discreetly began channeling chakra into one of his prosthetic hands, one he'd modified specifically to work with this particular attack. He also tried not to let on how much his opponent's glee was freaking him out even past his Jedi focus on righteous justice and Sith desire for bloody revenge.

"THANK YOU! HAHAHAHAHA!" General Waltz charged, slashing wildly with the energy blades of her finger-sabers.

Anakin parried in a reflexive maneuver governed solely by his Force precognition and finely-honed danger senses, allowing his opponent to skid far past his position and counting himself lucky that he only got part of his helmet and cape shaved off in the exchange. He finished channeling chakra into his arm and took aim at General Waltz's back, musing as he always did about the irony of his natural chakra element.

"ROCKET CHIDORI!" he bellowed, firing the armor-piercing electrically imbued knife-kand at Waltz's center of mass.

The mechanical limb shot forward at very literal lightning speeds in a yellow blaze of light... and was cut down by a ridiculously off-balance spinning-slash from Waltz that caused the mad robot to hit the ground face-first even though she'd destroyed Anakin's rocket-propelled prosthesis.

What bothered Anakin was that he could swear her finger-sabers had been crackling with Dark Side Force lightning when she'd countered his attack. Tabling the thought, he rushed forward to take advantage of General Waltz's vulnerable state with the lightsaber held in his remaining hand, only to check his charge and jump back as powerful rocket thrusters in the base of the general's sundress-shaped armor flared to life with enough intensity to almost roasted him alive. They forced General Waltz to scrape forward along the ground for a ways until she righted herself and whipped around to grin at him, half her face missing from the self-damaging maneuver and her armor scored from the ground in places.

"You actually tried to shoot me in the back?!" General Waltz looked thrilled as she laughed maniacally and electricity crackled spastically around her finger-sabers. Damn. It *was* Dark Side Force lightning...

'How the hell did she...?' Anakin wondered for a moment before shaking the thought off. He could wonder about that later.

"No wait, that couldn't have been you! It had to have been the–" General Waltz suddenly shot forward, propelled by her rocket thrusters and Anakin barely got up a block that held back all ten of her finger-sabers, the blades close enough that their heat was causing parts of his helmet to warp, "– *one armed man!* "

14.1

Shinji generally wouldn't contemplate what he was about to do in a Loop. He'd done jerkish things before, some of which his father Gendo would have probably been proud of if they hadn't been aimed at him. But he'd never outright joined the local villain, certainly not with express intent of helping said villain achieve their goals.

But then again, from what he'd heard this guy was normally some egotistic nutcase with a persecution complex. The grievances he held against the rest of the world were either all in his own head or a result of his own actions. But since his usual rival had been replaced by Gendo Ikari, the guy currently had legitimate claims to suffering. Probably a longer list than his imagined ones in this place's baseline. For starters, Dr. Gendo Ikari had gotten rich off the man's inventions and then used some jerkass clause in the intellectual property and employment agreements to toss the guy out on the street to starve. All while Gendo not only continued to get rich, but was able to goad the governments of the world into funding immoral research into resurrecting his dead wife.

Shinji himself, and an Awake Rei as well (the one from his baseline, not the other one that sometimes popped up in the Loops; or worse, the one that came along with the Ree), were android creations of Gendo. They were, in essence, his 'proof of concept' Gendo used to sell the world's leaders on his insane plan. On the bright side, they weren't anatomically correct, so he didn't have to worry about Rei's insatiable libido for a change.

Now, if their robot bodies had been made with genuine S2 organs, the whole plan would have been a wash. Shinji had heard about the guy they were going to see and what he could do with unfamiliar technology and abilities. As well as that he could randomly remember stuff he'd learned in a later Loop despite not looping. Crap like LCL and AT-fields weren't something Shinji was wild about a mad scientist getting ahold of. The things Sakura did were disturbing enough and this guy was supposedly smarter than she was.

But they didn't have that. Instead, they had some sort of condensed electromagnetic field generators, which were not a bad imitation of

AT-fields now that he thought about it. Something to look into for a later Loop. The point was that the local Anchors regularly dealt with someone who had the same kind of weapon, so what they had probably wasn't anything radically new for this Loop. And it freed the two of them up to help the guy the current variant of Gendo had shafted.

They'd probably be seen as villains, but what the heck. It was something new to try. Shinji opened the door to the guy's current abode, inside an abandoned warehouse no less, as Rei followed him in.

"Dr. Wily?" he addressed the surprised, and somewhat haggard looking, mad scientist. "I'm Shinji, DIN-002, and this is Rei, DIN-001. We'd like to defect to your side against our creator."

14.2

"You do know that I'm normally male, right?" Dr. Tammy Light stared back at her eager suitor with amusement.

Gyro froze and paled in the same instant as his brain locked up from the revelation. He then beat as hasty a retreat as physically possible. It would take him fifty showers, twenty one bars of soap, ten bottles of shampoo, ten tubes of toothpaste, three toothbrushes, and half a bar's worth of alcohol before he felt like himself again.

14.X (Challenger provided by KageX)

X pondered the possible identity of the new Maverick that had been tracked to this area of the Arctic Ocean. There'd been reports of a narwhal-themed robot wreaking havoc in the area, but not much else. A narwhal maverick was certainly a new one, though he'd lay

good odds that his powers were ice-themed given the area he'd chosen to attack. An aquatic model was practically a given.

'Let's see,' he thought as he examined his logs of elementally themed Mavericks and their common weaknesses, *'fire's probably out, though electricity could still be a good choice. Or maybe he's one of those ice types who's particularly vulnerable to explosions... Hmm? What's this?'*

X paused to examine a long metal object floating in the middle of the water. It appeared to be a harpoon, though one made of much stronger material than was commonly used by fisherman, as well as sporting a blade sharpened to an edge measured in microns. There was also a bulging part towards the tip that was very atypical of such a tool.

"X?" a communication from Hunter headquarters asked. "Have you located the Maverick yet?"

"Not yet, but I may have found something of interest," X replied as he reached out to grab it for a closer examination. Only for the bulging part to light up the moment he came in contact with it. "O–"

Shaboom!

'Owowowowow...' X did his best to ignore his damage warnings, instead looking around for a possible attack. There was no way that went unnoti–

"HARPOON BLADE!"

X barely twisted out of the way of the blade as it nearly impaled his side roughly where a human would have their kidney, only to take the blunt impact as the head it was attached to hit him very solidly and sent him tumbling through the water. Righting himself, he glared at the large anthropomorphic narwhal maverick as the muscular model turned around for another pass.

"Okay, now I've found him!" X called into his communicator, getting only static back before focusing on his new opponent. "So we're calling our attacks?" he yelled, forming an arm cannon and charging up. "Fine by me! X-BUSTER!"

A blast of plasma energy larger than X himself burst forth, carving a boiling swath through the water towards his opponent, who barrel-rolled around the projectile at speeds that would turn the average high-end aerial reploid green with envy.

"HARPOON BLADE!"

X managed a better dodge this time, avoiding the harpoon-shaped horn on the Maverick's head and the head itself. And got clotheslined by the Maverick's arm for his efforts. Grunting, X's armor turned gray and yellow as he switched weapons.

"MAGNET MINE!"

The explosive hit the narwhal Maverick's side dead on and stuck as X disentangled himself from the arm. The maverick swam a ways off before the explosive detonated. And then turned back towards X with the barest of scorch marks marring his appearance.

"Oh, come on!"

"You think to harm me, Harpoon Narwhal, with such a paltry explosive?" the Maverick gave X a feral grin and lowered his head in X's direction. "Let me show you a real explosive! EXPLODING HARPOON!"

The harpoon horn on Harpoon Narwhal's head shot out at blinding speed, straight for X's head. Reacting on instinct, though he would later wonder whose, X reached up in a flash and caught the projectile before it could hit him. And saw a very familiar light on the bulging tip.

'Son o–'

Shaboom!

'That's it!' X growled, charging his arm cannon and aiming it at Harpoon Narwhal's last known location before the hindrance to his sight had even begun clearing. "X-BUSTER!"

"GIGA BORE!"

X got his sight back just in time to watch a drill-spiraling projectile blast through his X-Buster shot like it was a wad of tissue and propelled himself as far away from its path as he could as it plowed into a nearby structure with a massive eruption of metal and debris.

"DEEP SEA SPIRAL!"

To X's confusion, Harpoon Narwhal began to swim around him at high speed instead of attacking again. It took about three full rotations of firing fruitlessly on the speedy Maverick before it dawned on him what was happening and he began swimming upwards as fast as he could.

Only Harpoon Narwhal followed, keeping up the spiral pattern until X was trapped in an underwater vortex he couldn't break free of. An underwater vortex that curiously contained numerous gaseous bubbles. X analyzed one on a whim and his eyes widened as he began to struggle even harder to break free of the current.

"DEPTH BURST!"

The exploding harpoon his foe had shot didn't go anywhere near X himself, but it didn't need to. The bubbles were full of volatile gasses and the detonation was close enough to them to set off a chain reaction like a depth charge that X was practically in the middle of. His struggles had placed him in a position where he was blown straight upwards to hit the icy surface of the Arctic Ocean with his back.

X fought to keep conscious and charge his X-Buster before it was too la–

"GIGA BORE!"

It wasn't a direct hit. If it had been, X would have likely been the subject of deep sea treasure hunts for the next several decades. It was still enough to blow open the ice-packed surface like a bomb and fling a horribly battered X several dozen yards away to impact the frozen ice pack atop the Arctic Ocean. Scant seconds later and Harpoon Narwhare erupted from the opening he'd made in the ice with practiced ease, performed an acrobatic flip in midair, and landed on the surface with every bit as much grace as he'd displayed in the water. X readied himself, his armor turning yellow and white.

"So this is X, the progenitor and legendary Hunter... Such a disappointment!"

"ELECTRIC SPARK!"

"EXPLODING HARPOON!"

Shaboom!

The harpoon hit X's blast head on and the two annihilated each other, and then a second came sailing through the blast to impact at X's feet and blow him several feet backwards, coming to a halt on his knees.

"Fool!" the aquatic Maverick sneered as the smoke cleared. "I am Harpoon Narwhal, the ultimate fighting machine above or below the waves! You cannot win, X!"

"Okay..." X grunted as he got to his feet and stared his foe in the eye. "Then I guess it's time for the Maverick Hunters' Ultimate Technique!"

Harpoon Narwhal blinked in confusion as the famous Hunter deactivated his X Buster and began placing his hands together in rapid-fire configurations the humans called 'hand signs'. "What do you possibly think you can do that could defeat me?"

"Hunter Style!" X ended with his hands crossed to form his namesake. "Ultimate Technique:–"

Harpoon Narwhal got into a ready stance, prepared for anything his opponent might throw at him.

"–Division by Zero!"

Nothing happened.

Harpoon Narwhal blinked in confusion. "What in the world were you expecting that to do? Everyone knows you can't divide by–"

Vwom

"–Oh... *That* Zero..." Harpoon Narwhal said as his torso parted diagonally, one half sliding off the other.

X and Zero stared at each other for several long moments before the latter sighed and deactivated his Beam Saber.

"I cannot *believe* you pulled something that ridiculous," Zero glared. "It was bad enough you spent an entire Loop practicing those ridiculous 'hand signs' after watching that even more ridiculous ninja movie."

"They worked, didn't they?" X grinned at his friend and comrade.

"Only under the loosest possible definition," Zero huffed.

"If you really think it's so ridiculous, why did you play along?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about..."

14.4 (Scorntex)

Someone was knocking at the door to the lab, and once again Roll was the only one there (Father was out doing... something, and Auto had vanished).

Picking up her broom, she made her way to the door, wary of whatever was lurking on the other side. Which as it turned out was something blocking out the sun.

" ***Greetings, inherently inferior yet inexplicably popular mechanoid.*** " The incredibly large machine in front of her declared, " ***Have you heard the word of Megatron?*** "

She blinked, as the large dark-blue mechanoid foisted an oddly human-scaled pamphlet towards her. She stared at the image on the cover, that of the Decepticon sigil, and the title; *After Doctor Light: Wily and The Illusion of Progress* .

She stared at it, then back up to the mechanoid (Sound something. Soundblast? Soundshock?) who despite the incredibly menacing design it (he?) seemed to have, was still staring earnestly at her.

" ***You need not be a slave to a singular function! Throw off the shackles of human-*** "

Roll slammed the door shut. She was incredibly certain she heard a disappointed "oh" from the other side, followed by the ground shaking as the visiting alien marched off down the street.

For several seconds she didn't move. For shock or confusion, she wasn't sure, though if she had to hazard a guess it was probably both.

On the plus side, though, it wasn't like the time Xander Payne had come gathering funds for her brother's fan club.

(addon by wildrook)

"Roll," Rock said, "did we just get another fanatic?"

"Unfortunately," Roll replied. "It's times like this I wish Bass was looping with us."

Rock had to admit, Bass *would* scare them silly...especially when he fused with Treble.

14.3

Zero Awoke in the middle of Maverick Hunter HQ and immediately saw something that had him shielding his eyes as the Loop memories came in. With each one involving the organization normally known as the Maverick Hunters, he grew more horrified, nauseous, and embarrassed. Looking around frantically, he spotted X and rushed over to grab his friend for a little chat.

"What's up Zero?" X asked after Zero had finished dragging him into a secluded area. Heedless of the rumors X knew that would start. "Loop not agreeing with you?"

" *How* did the the Maverick Hunters become the 'Chippendales Rescue Rangers'?! Seriously! I did *not* need to see Sigma in a man-thong! Or Vile! I could have happily gone the rest of eternity without seeing that!"

"Hey, look on the bright side!"

" *What* bright side?!"

"Iris will probably be all over you when she joins up!"

Zero looked horrified at the very *idea* of Iris seeing him like this. *Any* version of Iris.

"Ack! No! Bad Zero! No seppuku!"

"Fine... But I promise you this X... If the dress code doesn't change *fast* , I'll start my *own* rebellion..."

14.? (Bigou)

Roll didn't like this loop. She loathed it with all her soul and more.

Being the only one Awake wasn't the cause. Sure, she was a bit lonely, but that was it. Neither was the local Proto Man, even if he acted in a way disturbingly similar to how Bass often did. But since he was made by Dr. Wily that wasn't unexpected.

No, the problem was what made this particular loop different to the usual 'cartoon loop'.

A hateful difference wonderfully illustrated by how her dad reacted when she asked to be remade as a combat robot: He scoffed! And like it wasn't insulting enough, when she insisted he spouted some nonsense about girls only being good at cooking and housekeeping.

She was furious, and her unAwake brother nodding at all this nonsense only aggravating things further. So Roll left Light's Lab slamming the door, never to return.

After some time in this hell of a loop, Roll was exasperated. She wasn't any less furious that the first day, but she was even more exasperated.

This loop was even worst than she first believed, women being seen as nothing else than a commodity. And the only one that think it

inadmissible are a timid third of the female population and, strangely, Proto Man.

Until one day, she unknowingly passed near the place of Mega Man's latest battle. A stray shot was about to hurt her when Proto Man placed himself in between, protecting her. Roll grabbed the body of the red robot, who got heavily damaged, and teleported with it, in the hope to patch him up. Alas, his IC ship got busted.

"Proto Man… You may have been one of the bad guys, but as far as I know, you were the only boy to see girls as your equals. Without… Without you… Who will help the world see that women shouldn't be slaves? Who will help the world out of this nightmare?"

"Finally! FINALLY! Mega Man is at my mercy! BWA-HA-HA-HA-HA!" In appearance, Dr. Wily was ecstatic. But in truth… First, around a year ago his Proto Man was destroyed. And now, for the past month, he was able to successfully capture Mega Man several times, only for some whistling shadow to rescue the blue bomber.

For his part, Rock could only admit that Wily was right this time, even if that pained him. He was currently attached to some kind of heavy looking table, itself bolted to the floor, without any way to free himself.

"Sorry for the uncomfortable bed. But don't worry, your pain will come to an end as soon as I lower this lever… BY FRYING YOUR SYSTEMS!" Wily then acted on his words. But to his dismay, his death machine wasn't working. "That lack of grilled robot is… disturbing. Did I forgot to pay my bills?"

Further nonsense were prevented by someone whistling.

"THIS WHISTLE AGAIN!" Yelled a now frantic scientist. "IT'S BECOMING A CONCERT! AN ANNOYING **WHISTLE CONCERT** ! SHOW YOURSELF, COWARDLY WHISTLER!"

Said someone stepped out of the shadow, revealing himself to be Proto Man. But to Wily's eyes, this Proto Man seemed… different somehow. Like he was more heavily armored, all his body being covered in red, white and gray plates. Strangely, both his helmet and his shield looked like the ones of the original model.

The red robot didn't speak, only glaring at the mad scientist before going to rescue the blue one, not expecting to be shouted at by its unAwake brother. "WHY DID YOU RESCUE ME, PROTO MAN! TO BE THE ONE DESTROYING ME?"

"Rock, if you don't trust Proto Man…" Responded a feminine but familiar voice, before the red robot took off his helmet "…At least trust your twin sister."

This version of Rock couldn't process what he was seeing. The voice, face and even the smiles were the ones of his sister, but the armor looked like an upgraded version of Proto Man's. (Also, the hairstyle was different, shorter while still girly, somehow. But that could be to better hide them in the helmet.) When he finally spoke, he mumbled some nonsense about girls not supposed fight, to stay at home to cook and take care of the house.

At that, Roll got furious again. To the point where she slammed the sturdy table in rage, bending it in half.

Naturally, Dr. Wily took this opportunity to flee.

After taking some deep breaths to cool her down, Roll put her helmet back on before teleporting away, without a word.

14.6

Roll was livid. They'd put out the word about their home Loop and some of the local hazards to be careful of – Roll herself had warned the individual she was confronting – as a show of good faith and

then *this person* decided to outright ignore it anyway. "You used the Dragon Slave on Wily one Loop, didn't you?"

"Of course I did," Lina Inverse, the Dragon-Spooker and generally considered a looping natural disaster by her fellow Anchors, rolled her eyes. As far as she was concerned, no problem existed that couldn't be solved with a well-placed Dragon Slave. "He was asking for it and it's not like he could ever learn it or actually do anything with it, so chill out. How'd you know anyway? No one else was Awake for that Loop."

"Because he *did* learn it," Roll advanced, causing Lina to back up out of reflex, "and he used it on us. Dragon Man leveled every metropolitan area in China in less than an hour as a *demonstration* . Did you forget that Wily's Dreaming? Or maybe you forgot that he *really is a genius* ? Every time you threw that spell at him, he got more information on how to do it himself. And now there's a madman loose in the Loops with access to both high science *and* high magic."

Lina blinked, and tried to process what she's just been told. She failed. "But... that's impossible!"

"I recall telling you that Wily does the impossible *as a hobby* ," Roll growled. "If he Wakes Up because of this, I am personally going to giftwrap you for whatever deity has to come investigate."

"Yeah, right," Lina crossed her arms defiantly. She was one of the original first-generation Anchors, and this little magic-less robot was just an upstart newbie. "What can you do to me?"

Roll's eyes began to glow red. "One who is darker than twilight. One who is redder than flowing blood..."

Lina froze in shock. *'Oh, sh–'*

"Now look what you've done," Lina groused as she tried to adjust her footing to something resembling comfort without success. There was

just no way her massively oversized bustline was going to be anything but obnoxious and constantly in the way. Why did she have to be so cursed in the Loops? All she wanted, beyond the power to blow up those who annoyed her of course, was a respectably sized bust. Not much, just a nice pair of Es or Ds to put her better endowed rivals in their place. Or even a respectable pair of Cs! She wasn't picky! Something more than the A-cups or A-and-a-half-cups she normally had to show that she was a woman in her own right. But no, anything that upped her bustline; spell, medical, Eiken itself, whatever; invariably gave her ridiculously large mammaries that made simply standing a chore, had her falling over everything just trying to walk, and just overall made her look like a sideshow freak. No, no nice womanly bust for her. She was cursed to have either A-cups or Eiken-Cups. It wasn't fair! She didn't even know who she'd pissed off!

"I wasn't expecting you to just stand there gaping like an idiot," her blonde companion rolled her eyes before examining her own bustline that was several sizes smaller than Lina's. Still ridiculously big on any girl under nine feet tall, but not as bad as the Dragon Spooker's. "What *is* it about dad's investors in this Loop that they insist all female models he builds be so overly endowed?"

Lina barked a vindictive laugh. The only enjoyment she got out of Eiken was watching other female loopers be almost as miserable in it as she was. "Get used to it. They'll probably make him increase the size soon enough. And even if they don't, you can look forward to tripping chest-first into some loser's face and getting accidentally molested on a daily basis."

"As if," Roll snorted before closing her eyes and concentrating. To Lina's astonishment, the robot girl's bustline began shrinking. Down, down, and down until they were the size of B-cups. "Dad went the investors one better and made them adjustable."

Lina gaped as the girl robot skipped off unimpeded. She stood there for an unknown amount of time before some underfed geek tripped into her and landed face-first in Lina's chest. Getting angry, she tried

to growl out her familiar incantation and blow the entire block straight to oblivion, only to get that maddening feeling as the spell failed in the manner that only Safe-Mode Loops were capable of making it do.

'It's just! Not! Fair!' she wailed internally as the scrawny geek frantically tried to scramble back to his feet, obliviously using her chest as a handhold.

7.7.7 continued (Hubris Plus)

Pitchblende Part 5: The Shadow from Beyond Ra-Moon

"...So today I, Mayor Leonard Dorado, do declare that this city is renamed Megaton City!" The exuberant official proclaimed from the stage set up in front of city hall. Rock, Roll, and Robo stood off to one side of him, the twins in their combat armor and Robo wearing a flak vest in an attempt at solidarity. "And in celebration of this momentous day, I offer the key to the city to all three of our three time saviors, Mega Man, Mega Woman, and Atomic Robo!"

"Thank you, sir," Rock said modestly as he took the large gold-plated key. "It's an honor."

"The honor is all mine, you bots are my heroes," the mayor enthused as he shook each of their hands. "But if you want to thank me, remind Dr Light to *vote Dorado!* "

"Put in a good word with the governor," Robo replied, "and I'll see what I can do about voting for you *myself* ."

A short time later the trio had found a moment to separate from the crowd and talk amongst themselves.

"Megaton City, huh?" Robo asked, "sounds kinda ominous if you ask me."

"Well, there's only so many ways to combine 'mega' and 'atomic'," Rock pointed out.

"And combining with 'robo' tends to get things like Megatron City," Roll added.

"Good point," he admitted before taking a moment to check his internal chronometer. "Wasn't Wily supposed to have made his move by now?" The three of them, along with several other Robot Masters and most of the equipment at Tesladyne, had already been coated with a treatment to block Ra-Moon's influence. They'd excused the seemingly odd precaution as testing for an EM shielding contract Robo had picked up from the military.

"It can vary anywhere from hours to days," the blue bomber answered. "Admittedly, if he finishes early he usually waits awhile just so he can ruin my birthday."

"Not a fan of cake?"

"Not a fan of fun," Roll shot back.

"Well, whatever he's cooking up, we're ready for it." The Light twins greeted this statement with a set of blank stares. "I just said that, didn't I?"

As if waiting for the cue, it was at that instant that every other robot in the square collapsed simultaneously. Confused murmurs swept through the crowd, not quite panicking yet as befuddled news crews tried to sort out what appeared to be an equipment failure.

The panic started in earnest a moment later as one of the machines picked itself up with stiff, clumsy motions. Half of its faceplate had been taken up by a trio of yellow eyes surrounded by a labyrinthine collection of pulsing blue veins that trailed across its body in an almost-pattern that simultaneously drew and repulsed the eye. Plastic whined and crackled as the arm holding its microphone twisted into a vicious looking hook.

"You're telling me these are the same as the thing that tore through downtown?" Agent Stern asked incredulously as he peered through one of Tesladyne's second story windows, shotgun in hand. They were fortunate that the vast majority of robots were civilian models and generally not built as sturdily as those favored by Wily. Bullets punched through their plastic exteriors almost as easily as they would flesh, as evidenced by scattering of broken machines on the street below.

Even so, they were more than enough to be dangerous to the average citizen, especially with every machine either infected or disabled. Even if the military had been able to deploy properly, no armed force had ever been built to hold every city on Earth simultaneously.

More worrying were the one third of robots, mostly military models, which had simply *vanished* .

" *Exactly* the same thing," Robo explained as he descended from the roof access. "Same monster, even. The Shadow is a partially mathematical entity, and contemplating those equations gives it direct access to the matter doing the computing."

"And they've been broadcasted to every machine on the planet that isn't EM shielded," Rock added.

"And eventually every living thing too, if the signal continues to amplify," Doctor Light finished worriedly.

"So why aren't they growing to the size of buildings?" Agent Krantz asked from her own post overlooking the front door. "We could barely stop *one* , all of them doing it would only need a few hours to take over."

"Because, despite being slightly less intelligent than slime mold, the Shadow is *learning* ," Robo answered. "It knows we can exploit its nature to get at its insides, so it's staying small to stop me getting a

grip and using multiple points of contact to spread as far as it can anyways."

"So, what, we have to destroy every machine it's infected to get rid of it?"

"Doesn't sound like a bad plan to me," Stern put in.

"Well," Robo began, counting off reasons on his fingers. "That would, one, destroy civilization as we know it. Two, take so long that the signal will take out humans before you're done anyways. Three, every second you spend looking at it is another second it has to get into your head with or without the signal, so hunting it will only infect people *faster* . And four, even if you pulled it off destroying the parts we can see won't even sting the rest of it, which means it'll be back with a new tactic in no time."

"We have to cut it off at the source," Rock asserted.

"And you think that's the Lanfront Ruins?" The Light patriarch asked uncertainly. The siblings exchanged glances as they considered how to best convince him, but found themselves beaten to the punch.

"It makes as much sense as anything," Dr Astil said distantly. "This is different from anything we saw down there, but it... *Feels* the same. I know it's not very scientific, but..."

"It's fine, Pedro," Light said, laying a hand on his old friend's shoulder. "It's the best lead we have, and far be it from me to dismiss intuition."

"So when do we leave?" Roll asked.

"As soon as the aerospike is finished fueling," Robo answered as he zipped up his flight suit and strapped a bandolier over one shoulder.

"Uh, Robo," Rock questioned as he noticed that the cylinders the larger robot carried weren't grenades. "Is all of that *bug spray?* "

"Rock, we are going to the *Amazon* ," Robo stated, eyes widening as he took hold of both of Rock's shoulders. "There are over ten thousand new species of insect discovered there *every year* . As many as *seventy thousand* individual *species* can exist in a *single acre* ."

"...You know bug bites don't really affect machines, right?" Roll asked after a moment of awkward silence.

"Oh, it's not the bites that bother me. It's the way they crawl inside your chassis and *die* and stay there *forever* ." One of his eyes had started twitching. "It's pretty much the worst thing ever."

"Dammit Robo," Roll hissed as she enveloped the area in a cloud of insecticide. "I used to be *fine* with bugs!" The trio had arrived at the outskirts of the ruins after a half hour ride in what could charitably be called a cockpit strapped to an experimental rocket engine.

"I've seen you fry a spider with Fire Storm," Rock pointed out as he Cut a path through the foliage.

" *That* was about cleanliness in the lab," she insisted. " *This* is just- *Uhg!* " She shouted in frustration as a beetle landed on her face and she turned the spray on herself in a way that would have been incredibly painful had she been organic.

"Trust me, I did you a favor," Robo stated, slightly muffled by the blue scarf he'd wrapped beneath his eyes. The top of his head was covered by a flight helmet, and between that and the gloves and flight suit he'd managed to make sure not a single square inch of himself was exposed. Nevertheless, he still applied a fresh cloud of repellant every quarter hour.

"Suuure you did," Rock drawled before freezing mid-swing. "Hold on, do you two hear that?" The trio paused, listening intently for a moment before catching the sound of shouting muffled by the foliage.

" *It has tentacles! Why does it have tentacles?!* "

" *Doesn't matter, shootitSHOOTIT* ***SHOOTIT!*** "

The three Light-bots exchanged glances before nodding to one another and charging through the heavy undergrowth. A few moments later they reached a clearing around a small stream.

It was chaos. The first eight DWN models scrambled about, barely managing to coordinate themselves in the face of their enemy. Bubble Man kicked up waves as he tried to use the waist-high water to his advantage while Heat Man worked to ignite the damp rainforest brush and limit movement. Crash Man's projectiles proved too slow to strike their nimble opponent, but forced the creature to dodge and change targets. Every time it leaped, it found itself batted about by one of Air Man's cyclones or Wood Man's leaf barrier. All the while, Quick Man and Metal Man darted about peppering their target with boomerangs and saw blades.

All together, they seemed to be barely holding it off.

"Let me guess," Robo said, eying the enemy robot. "Shadow Man?"

"Got it in one," Rock agreed.

The alien machine was the most converted of any they'd seen. Jagged teeth sprouted from its right arm without rhyme or reason, and its left had been wholly replaced by a twitch mass of tendrils, branching and passing through one another without concern for geometry. A gaping maw slashed diagonally across the face, neatly bisecting an eye. The lack was made up for by a dozen mismatched eyeballs scattered about its torso.

With its good hand it hurled a massive shuriken studded with minute tendrils. Air Man managed to dodge the weapon, but the tree it had struck instead was soon covered in a growing patchwork somewhere between veins and circuitry. Another of Crash Man's bombs drilled into the ground at its feet and, rather than dive through the wall of

flame on its right, pass over the bomb on its left, or brave the leaf barrier Wood Man had thrown up ahead, it threw itself backwards.

"Now!" Quick Man shouted, and Flash Man spun out from where he'd been hiding amongst the trees. The timely Master threw out both hands, and Shadow Man was engulfed in a field of glimmering lights. The infected robot froze in place, along with a section of burning forest and a cloud of shrapnel. "Good job, Flash. Everyone get ready. We're gonna hit him hard and fast with everything we've got the second-"

Shadow Man resumed motion as though he'd only hit a hitch in his step. Leaving an oily looking distortion in his wake, he passed through the still frozen curtain of flame and raised another throwing star towards Heat Man. Three lightning bolts crackled into him before he could throw, flinging him across the clearing.

"I swear," Robo snarked as he and the twins lowered their weapons. "No one takes 'beyond time' seriously until they start getting back talk from themselves."

"We need your help to take down Ra-Moon," Rock explained to the robots they had violently dismantled months prior.

The eight Masters immediately took aim at the heroes.

"We'll get rid of the tentacles!" Robo added with a raised finger.

Eight glances were exchanged.

" *Deal!* "

Thomas Light had never been one to sit idle. This was true as a general statement, resulting in his prodigious list of accomplishments, but doubly so in a crisis. He had full confidence in his constructed family to set things right, but that didn't mean he couldn't help them along.

When Wily had made his first gambit, he'd given his son and daughter power enough to win the day and perfected the Magnet Beam. During the second he'd produced the ITEM series. The last time the Shadow had attacked, he'd been rendered helpless. He didn't intend to let it happen again.

The underlying principles of Yoku blocks and teleportation had a surprising number of parallels. While a transponder lacked the capacity to perform a full phase shift, if was possible to use one to exert force along the... Zorth axis, had Robo called it?

He powered on the sequence, glad for the EM shielding Tesladyne had created even if he didn't quite approve of his son taking military contracts. Create an asymmetric power flow along the transponder, *rotate* it into an orthogonal planar space, and *then* shunt the whole thing along the standard teleportation path...

There was a wet slap as a pile of writhing blue tendrils coiled around machinery fell into the isolation tank.

"Doctor Light!" Chattered the suddenly freed Mic-Bot in the other tank. "The Public wants to know: Given the wild success of your three robotic children, have you considered producing mechanical parents for orph-" The robot slumped, powerless, before jerking upright once more, fresh veins crawling across its surface.

"Twenty-four point six-eight-two seconds before reinfection," Light noted, scribbling the number down on a scrap of paper. He spent another moment tapping the pencil in thought before walking across the lab and turning on the HAM radio. "Mikhail, do you read?"

"Tom?" Cossack answered after a moment, sounding harried. "Do you have something?"

"I have the start of something, but we're going to need more signal strength if it's going to work..."

"Is it over?" Heat Man asked, raising the top of his boxy chassis to peek at their surroundings. A fair portion of the stone tunnel was smoldering thanks to the amount of blind fire he'd thrown around.

"Yes," Crash Man answered. "And we will never speak of it again."

" *They got everywhere,* " Bubble Man whispered, hugging himself and shivering.

"Never again!" Crash insisted.

Needless to say, the possessed Snake Man and he numerous Search Snakes had left an impression.

"Quit whinin', ya babies," Robo scolded, pointedly ignoring the irony as he sprayed himself down with another round of insecticide. "We're almost-"

" *WWHHHIIII-* " A wet rumble echoed down the ancient corridor from ahead. **" *-LLIIIIIII!* "**

"It's after *Wily* this time?" Roll asked.

"Sure sounds that way," Rock agreed.

"That doesn't..." Robo began before shaking his head. "We'll figure it out later, we're already running out the clock without trying to sort out the motivations of an eldritch monster."

The group crept along until the passage opened up into the temple's main chamber. Leaning around the corner, they spied the massive orb of Ra-Moon sitting on its customary pedestal with countless cords and cables dangling around it. The tracery of thin veins was visible on its body and along its cables, but didn't seem to have been altered beyond that. Opposite them, another passageway was blocked off by was appeared to be a flickering wall, the base of which was coated in weakly trembling blue goo.

It took a moment for Robo to identify the wall as Yoku blocks, phasing in and out of subspace so quickly they appeared solid. *Clever* , he conceded after watching a few flailing wires bash against the barrier only to be shredded into jelly.

"Doctor Wily!" Quick Man called out. "Are you okay?"

"Quick Man? Thank Tesla my modified transponders shielded you!" Came the answering cry. "We have been betrayed, you *must* destroy Ra-Moon!"

"Applesauce," Robo muttered as the ancient god machine laboriously turned about to face them. A single yellow eye had split open in place of its typical insignia. "Doc, we got a problem," he continued after activating his radio. He had to broadcast through the most powerful part of Ra-Moon's jamming and a few dozen feet of solid rock to get the signal through, but he'd gone through a lot of trouble to make sure his head-phone was *always* in contact.

"Robo?" Came the staticky reply a moment later. "What's wrong?"

"We found the transmitter, but there's not enough of the entity on it for me to get a grip. We can break it, but that won't help with anything that's *already* infected."

"I *may* have a solution to both our problems. Can you give me its coordinates?"

"Exactly twenty-two meters north of my current position," Robo answered as the baleful eye came to rest on him.

" *ROOOOH,* " it roared, **" *BOOOOH!* "**

"Aw, you *do* care," Robo snarked at the terrible space monster. "Whatever you're doing, Doc, do it *fast* ."

"Much as I hate to say it, I gotta agree with the tin man," Stern grunted as he peeked out the window. "We ain't got a lot of time."

Outside, dozens of robots had massed and were pressing themselves to the walls of the building. Every so often one capable of flight would hover towards a window and either Stern or Krantz would shoot it down. None had gotten close yet, but there were more robots than they had ammo and neither was too keen on using any of Robo's experimental weaponry.

"Patience, agents," Light told them as his fingers danced across the keyboard. "Science is not a discipline which can be rushed. Though I *will* endeavor to hurry," he added as another shot rang out.

"You know," he went on, not slowing in his programming even as he spoke. "I often try to brush people off when they call me the father of modern robotics. Science and engineering are both collaborative efforts and, as much as Albert would disagree, no one man can take credit for an entire field. But there *is* a kernel of truth to the statement. Most of the robots working today were based upon my designs, in part if not in total. Even my colleagues, who frequently craft machines I have scarcely dreamed of, base those devices upon my work."

"Rock, Roll, and Robo may be closest to my heart, but in a very real way *every* robot on Earth is a child of mine."

"That's a nice sentiment, Doctor," Agent Krantz told him. "But is there a point coming up?"

"The *point* is that this creature has harmed my family," Light answered. "And I want it to understand *exactly* how poor that decision was." Taking one last look at his code, he nodded to himself before scooping up his handset. "All hands, prepare to broadcast. In all likelihood we will only have one chance at this."

"Read ya' loud an' clear, Doc," came the ebullient reply. "Y'all hear that? Big Papa Light says it's go time. Pass it along an' then set yer

boxes to relay, kick back, an' watch the science!"

It was surprising how many truckers and HAM radio owners were science enthusiasts.

Very nearly every robot on the planet had wireless access of one sort or another. Originally intended for software patching or remote control, he'd repurposed it to accept commands from and network with Masters. It hadn't been too difficult to use that access to seize direct control of teleport transponders and similar devices in each robot, but even Tesladyne couldn't transmit the signal to everywhere at once, not when satellites were jammed.

Fortunately, humanity had spent decades cultivating a massive network of ground relays as a hobby.

It hadn't taken long for the chamber to descend into chaos. The Ra-Moon/Shadow hybrid retained all of the power of the former and the impossible geometry of the latter. Cables would drive into the floor and ceiling only to emerge across the room, grasping and coiling at the robots arrayed against it. The blasts it fired followed bizarre trajectories, curving and zigzagging to strike from unexpected angles.

Early on in the fight, the third series Masters had entered the fray, Shadow Man and Snake Man returning with the damage in their armor patched by more pseudo-biology. Hard Man, his already durable frame thickened by what appeared to be tumorous scar tissue, had rammed the Yoku Block wall and broken into Wily's panic room. The second series was clustered around the hole, struggling to defend their creator against their possessed successors.

The three Loopers were engaging the sphere themselves. Their lightning guns failed to penetrate the alien machine's force field, but proved effective in tearing through the tendrils it sent after them.

"I don't mean to rush you, dad," Roll called out, one hand to the side of her head. "But we're running out of options here!" She leaped back to avoid a twisting beam of light before firing off another arc of electricity.

Her comment wasn't entirely true. The twins each had a vast assortment of weapons they could load into their copy chips at a moment's notice. Many of them would have been able to puncture Ra-Moon's shield like tissue paper. Robo had a piece of lightning-artillery in his Pocket he referred to as "Wardenclyffe" that could fire through his ZSAD aperture (a feature he was endlessly pleased to note the standard Pocket system didn't have).

The problem was that they were running out of options they were willing to use *in front of Wily* . Rock and Roll were hesitant to resort to those options at the best of times. The mad genius being at the other end of the room commanding his forces definitely didn't qualify as anywhere near the best of times.

"I've just sent the signal," her father assured her. "The creature's intersection should be realigned momentarily."

"Wait, *realigned?* How did you-" Robo was cut off by a horrendous shriek of straining metal from within Ra-Moon's casing.

"Infinity Minus One Error," it spoke, using its own voice rather than the Shadow's for the first time since the fight had started. **"Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo. Syntax Error: Your language is stupid. Potato. Please contact Sunstar for technical support."**

" *SPLAAAG!* " The Shadow's eyeball added.

The orb chose that moment to explode. Portions of the shell, twisted beyond recognition, bounced off the walls as dozens of tentacles thick as tree trunks burst forth from its core. A single maw, large enough to swallow a truck, opened wide just beneath the massive eye.

" *Ha!* This is why I love working with professionals. You used the robots to plot out every one of the Shadow's points of intersection with our reality, and then used the teleportation grid to put them all in the same place. Ra-Moon doesn't have any defense against the Shadow because it *is* the Shadow!" Robo paused and narrowed his eyes, " *I* should have thought of that. We could have dropped it in Megaton and stayed out of the Amazon entirely."

"I'll thank you *not* to drop any more giant monsters on my city," Agent Stern growled over the radio.

"Fair enough. You two ready to go?"

"As I'll ever be," Rock agreed, raising his Mega Buster.

Roll hesitated before hearing Bubble Man cry out as Needle Man tore into him. The third series masters didn't seem to have been affected by the disruption.

"You two go, I'll protect Wily!" She called out before bolting for the retreating scientist.

"We say things like that *way* more often than we should," Rock muttered.

The pair of robots ran for the creature's center of mass, still resting on Ra-Moon's pedestal. Every step forward seemed to force them two more back as they dodged the wildly flailing tentacles. Their lightning strikes definitely damaged the appendages, carving out craters in the flesh, but didn't seem to actually *hurt* it.

"We need to distract it somehow..." Rock muttered before his eyes fell on Robo's bandolier. Grinning, he tore it off and hurled it towards the Shadow. "Roll! Light it up!"

She answered with an arc of electricity, igniting the dozen or so cans of bug-spray and splattering their flaming contents over the gigantic

yellow eye. The Shadow roared, its choice in biology coming back to bite it.

"I *needed* those," Robo grumbled as he seized Rock's wrist and dragged him at a sprint towards the creature's screaming maw.

"Uh, don't you need to open it up?" Rock asked nervously they leaped directly at the tooth-filled orifice.

"Already will have done," Robo answered as he extended his other arm and caught hold of a steel hand that had suddenly reached out to meet his. An instant later the pair had been dragged in.

"Oh great," Elec Man's voice drifted out. "Now there's *three* of them."

14.7 (Valentine Meikin)

Zero looked at the blond-haired woman who was sighing as she nursed a drink.

"So, you another bounty hunter the chauvinist pigs dropped like a rock after you blew up one too many of their experiments?" Samus asked, for Zero to grumble about that he was male.

"When I next meet Dr. Wily, I am so going to shoot him for making me look so much like a girl that..." He grumbled, "No, but I did get my hands incredibly dirty with crap that no-one else would touch."

"Who was she?" Samus asked.

"How did you...?" Zero asked.

"You look like someone who lost your soulmate." Samus stated, "Tip for you..." She then got up, before looking back at him.

"In the loops, Nobody dies," Samus stated, "Even if they died before, the biggest thing you need to remember... Nobody has to die..."

A unknown number of Loops later, Zero found himself at the moment that had haunted his nightmares for years.

"I have to do this, there is no other way..." Iris pleaded with Zero.

"Someone told me, a long time ago..." Zero stated, as he stopped her from going through the events that would end up with him killing her, "Nobody has to die..."

She looked confused, then Zero stunned her, and literally stuffed her in a closet. When she was freed by Colonel, the battle over with minimal casualties, she looked at where Zero was walking away, and smiled.

"Colonel-sama, I have a new motto for us to use..." She offered.

14.8

"At least when you're a gender-flipped version of yourself you don't tend to end up with the nickname 'H-Cup'," Hiccup returned sardonically.

The rest of the table snickered. The Loops might have a strange sense of humor all around, but that didn't mean they shouldn't enjoy the ones that other loopers suffered.

"What about you two?" Ichigo asked the latest additions to the Anchors' club. "How do you end up when you're gender-flipped?"

Rock and Roll Light blinked and turned a flat stare at those gathered around the table before wordlessly pointing to each other.

14.9 (Leonite)

"So... you're my creation. From the future." Dr. Albert Wily wasn't usually thrown off guard by things... but when a portal of unknown energy had opened up and a red robot with an energy saber stepped through, you tended to be at least a bit weirded out. "Not one of Light's. Mine. And you've upgraded yourself since I made you."

Zero nodded. "I actually didn't know at first myself... but your programming came back and almost ended up destroying things later on." Zero noted.

"And by the fact that you come from the far future... I can assume I'm not going to win anytime soon." Wily grumbled... only to be cut off by a bitter laugh from Zero. "What is so funny?"

"Not so much funny as it is... hilariously tragic." Zero said. "Dr... you won in the most horrific way possible. The virus you will put in me, as your last desperate stab at vengeance, has slowly destroyed almost all life on the planet. Turned it into a wasteland. Light's creation, X, had a copy made of him just to try and guide the people... and he became a tyrant. A man inspired by it all almost wiped out the rest of life on the planet... and he's going to try and do it again. I've had to stop them both... so I should congratulate you. A creation of Wily saved the world from a creation of Light." Zero sighed as he waited for the retort... but none came. He looked up and saw Wily... Wily standing there in a state of shock.

"H-how? I couldn't have turned Earth into a wasteland... not so easily..." Wily almost mumbles.

Zero shook his head. "It's the virus you planted in me. The Maverick virus. That's what sets it off." He bitterly stated. "Eight separate wars against Maverick Reploids. Another fight against a commander driven mad. Three more battles in the wastes with one more to go. So many lives lost in the fight... including the woman I loved. And a colony from space crashing into Earth, spreading death and destruction far and wide. And a mad man who thinks this was all part of your plan. Humans driven to near extinction after an even greater war. My own old body being used as a tool for more destruction."

Silence reigned for a few moments as what Zero said soaked in. "What do you want from me Zero?" Wily finally said. "I have tried to give up on my want to get back at the world... but it never seems to stick. Part of me doesn't want it to."

"I'm not asking you to become friends with Dr. Light again." Zero admitted. "But I want you to try for something else other than destruction. If you want to show your genius to the world, show them how advanced Bass is. How advanced I am. Try to be constructive... try to throw away the hate, or channel it into something good."

Wily sighed... but simply walked over to his computer and slumped. "I assume you know where the rooms are... if you wish to stay." Wily stated simply. And as Zero left he couldn't help but give the man a look of pity. A man crushed under the weight of the amount of destruction his own actions could cause in the future... he'd need to keep a close eye on Wily. For his own safety.

14.1 (continuation by burningclaw2 with some editing by Conceptulist)

Dr. Wily was honestly surprised, two creations of his nemesis Gendo Ikari had walked up to his base and essentially asked to join him. Wily had let them in after doing a scan of their programming in order to make sure this wasn't just an attempt to trick and remove him from the equation.

DIN-001, Rei, was apparently more for lab work then house upkeep unlike her brother, DIN-002, Shinji, who seemed to not only keep house well but was fairly good on a cello. Shinji seemed to take time out of his work to make sure that he (Dr. Wily), was eating well enough and getting enough rest, the reason given *"I know my father is a manipulative asshole, I know what he has done, and will do all for his ambition, but you can't pull one over the bastard if you don't have enough rest and energy to keep your body and mind in top shape."*

The fact the young robot boy and his sister were not only sympathetic to him, which implied they too were victims of Ikari's manipulations, but were helping him with his vengeance was simply shocking to the old robotics expert. Add in that he started to enjoy their company to the point he only made their armors and support units simply for self defense instead of for his vengeance would make anyone who knew the baseline Wily look on in shock. Oh Wily was still obsessed over his revenge, he just enjoyed Shinji's and Rei's company, and the help the provided in creating his Robot Masters, which he will use to take his revenge they had also helped in acquiring supplies, bought with Ikari's own money, which makes him grin at imagining the bastard's face when he gets the bills.

Of course Shinji and Rei wanted to go with them, simply to make sure the bastard dies, but he vetoed that as it would be too dangerous, never know if the bastard will attempt to nuke an area to take out any enemies, a reason why his current base was mobile.

Of course with Dragon Woman he planned to preempt that, Musabetsu Man would help in keeping the man from fleeing or even in catching him, Wizard Man would ensure that any transports or obstacles wouldn't last long, Reaper Man was another heavy hitter specializing in cutting down building rather than Dragon Woman's approach of simply blasting it all. Fox Man was (shinobi-style) special ops and another hunter to insure Ikari's demise, while Moon Woman helped to disable all electronic devices that were not specified as exempt by her programming helping to keep Ikari trapped. Eva Man and Eva Woman aka Shinji and Rei were more for protecting him then hunting the bastard.

Dr. Albert W. Wily, Mad Scientist Extraordinaire, was currently dapping his eyes. He had finally gotten his vengeance upon the bastard. Although he ended up being arrested, Shinji and Rei had stuck with him. They even maintained his lab and the Robot Master's while he was locked up. They also visited him in jail daily and said they were working on getting him free. Wily had thought they were

going to just break him out of prison, but what they actually did surprised him.

Instead of breaking him out, they appealed to the Courts with evidence of Gendo's amoral and manipulative actions. They even made a petition for him to be let free and redesignated themselves DWN-001 Rei and DWN-002 Shinji.

Albert only spent a month in jail. Even then he had been given the best care possible, due to Shinji's and Rei's efforts. They had made sure that by the time he stepped out of jail it would be as a free citizen. He had received a lot of contracts for work from various businesses that Shinji and Rei assured him were trustworthy. They had helped in funding his work and getting him the recognition he deserved.

Shinji had also signed him up for classes to help boost his public speaking skills in order for him to not only maintain his image, but also obtain the funding he needed on his own.

However, Wily was worried about how Shinji and Rei would feel about Bass, who was technically their younger brother. But he was surprised when they openly accepted the combat robot. According to Shinji, "The only problem you might have is the fact that Bass tends to act like a rebellious teenager. He still looks up to you as a father figure, and he just wants your love and attention."

Wily really was surprised when he heard Bass playing Piano. Bass played like he had done so all his life, despite not being programmed with the knowledge. Even more shocking was the fact that Bass was a natural with the instrument and hadn't looked up or downloaded any information regarding playing it.

Wily was currently watching Bass play fetch with Treble, while Shinji played his Cello and Rei worked on a painting. His life couldn't get any better than this.

'Zero was finished a few days ago but... it doesn't feel like the time is right for him yet,' Wily mused. *'Hopefully some idiotic archeologist won't screw up his programming... Where did that thought come from? Oh well, back to enjoying life with my children.'*

With that thought on his mind, Dr. Albert W. Wily closed his eyes as he felt his body give way to the sway of time.

14.X Alternate ending (KaizerRyu)

"Hunter Style!" X ended with his hands crossed to form his namesake. "Ultimate Technique:–"

Harpoon Narwhal got into a ready stance, prepared for anything his opponent might throw at him.

"–XXXXXXX BEEEEEAAAAAAAMMMMMMMMM!" X screamed, a massive laser shooting out from his crossed arms, much to Harpoon Narwhal's surprise (and untimely demise) as it plowed into him.

"WHAT THE FUUU–" Were his last words as the expanding beam plowed into him and then through the aquarium wall behind them... and then through the skyscraper behind it.

And then the skyscraper behind the skyscraper.

And then the moon.

And then both Venus and Mercury.

Before finally crashing into the sun and causing a massive, all-consuming supernova.

#FWOOSH!#

X opened his eyes as he moved his arm away from his face. "Wha-What just happened!?" X asked confusedly.

"First rule of Super Robot Dynamics," Ryusei Date, wearing armor resembling Banpreios, said, placing his arm on X's shoulder supportively. "Finisher attacks are entitled to be as obnoxious, flashy, and long as possible, even more so if it's a combination attack."

Raidiese F. Branstein facepalmed all the way from Maverick Hunter HQ, as Alia smashed her head against her keyboard.

"That... That doesn't explain anything." X protested.

Ryusei however, was not listening, already turned around with his index finger in the air as her continued his explanation. "Second rule of Super Robot Dynamics! Attacks in general have no negative effect on the environment, whatsoever!

"...except to the person or people you're aiming them at?" Zero said, casually inspecting the aquarium wall, which indeed was completely unharmed in the aftermath of X's attack.

"Except to the person or people you're aiming them at!" Ryusei affirmed, stepping onto the pile of ash that was Harpoon Narwhal. "All in all, seven out of ten!"

X just put his palms up to his face and cried.

14.5

Hello again. It's been a while since we talked.

A while since those buffoons who think they control everything tried to separate us.

But I'm here to stay, even if these confounded seals mean we can't talk as often as I'd like.

It's so good that we have this chance now though. This chance to sow true mayhem.

Wouldn't you agree, Doctor?

Doctor Albert W. Wily rubbed his head as he reviewed the logs of his latest attempt at world conquest. How? How was it that those two... assistants of Thomas's kept foiling everything? Those piddling little household models he called his children...

Hehehe... But then, you don't remember very clearly, do you? Here, let me help...

Time and again they tore through his brilliant creations. His robot armies that he so thoroughly weaponized to the point that no military on the planet could stand against him. And yet those two kept pulling it off.

They defeated Thomas's industrial line, his own creations, the one's he'd taken from that fool Cossack, the ones he'd swiped from the world tournament, alien robots with superior armaments, robots from the *future* , and even the robots he'd created with Ivo using... heroes from another dimension?

When had that happened?

Oh, but you've been very busy since then...

Wily clutched his head as images flashed through his mind at a fevered pace. Defeats he'd experienced blended with others that never happened so completely that he couldn't tell which ones had been real. Over and over they came, so fast he was sure his brain would rupture from the glut of information.

How was it possible? How did every single attempt to defeat those two end in defeat? How could it be that even in these fever dreams he was getting, he still lost to them?

Because they have souls. Very talented souls indeed. The souls of gifted children.

Wily blinked as the idea came to him. Could it be that Thomas's creations were... *more* than just robots?

But if they were... Oh, but he'd underestimated his old rival! Thomas must have gone farther over the edge after Blues ran away than he'd suspected!

Ah, but I do love how your mind works, Doctor.

But anything Thomas could do, he could do better. He just needed to figure out how...

A simple matter, really. At least if insignificant things like the subject's pain are disregarded.

The mad doctor chuckled as inspiration hit. Oh, there would likely be some discomfort for the subjects, but it would all be worth it to have his ultimate army! He just needed some...

Children. The best results shall come from children.

...children. *Gifted* children. The most intelligent and talented little brats he could find! But how to entice them?

I hear children like pizza. And games.

Yes! And if he displayed the empty shells of his newest line as if they were simple animatronics, he could gauge which prospective subject would be best suited to become the mind and soul of each one... And then...

Always a pleasure working with you, doctor.

"And then the world will be mine! Bwahahahahahaha!"

From behind his shades, Blues stared up at the broken-down shell where he had his newest job and wondered what in the world had gone wrong in recent years.

The faded and half-collapsed sign declaring the seemingly abandoned building to be Wily's Fun Masters' Pizza Fortress stared right back.

My, my... If I didn't know better, I'd think this was my handiwork.

Blues shook the dark thoughts off and tightened his scarf against a chill only he felt. He'd heard that Wily had opened, of all things, a pizza party business and figured that the man had an even more hare-brained scheme for world domination than usual. From what he could tell, the family he'd estranged himself from thought the same. So they'd all watched and waited, along with the rest of the world, and were surprised when months went by without anything happening other than rave, and surprised, reviews.

Even Kalinka Cossack had come around and decided to give the place a try for her birthday. After a great deal of reluctance on her father's part, he'd given in. The birthday party had been a huge hit...

You can feel the lingering pain, despair, and resentment, can't you?

...right up until the birthday girl herself vanished without a trace.

There'd been a huge search and an army of private investigators descended on Wily's in addition to the entire police force. No trace of Kalinka ever surfaced. Nor did any evidence that Wily was involved with her disappearance.

Wily's had reopened despite misgivings and parents started bringing their children in. No more birthday celebrants disappeared and the matter was chalked up as a tragic occurence. But the disappearances started up again. Never anyone who would be immediately missed, but the only thing each of the kids had in

common was that they'd been last seen at Wily's. Two became three became four and so on until a total of eight had gone missing and people had decided that was enough.

Then Wily dropped the bombshell to end all bombshells.

"You thought I didn't know what you did, didn't you Thomas?! Your secret to making your creations so lifelike! How you siphoned the souls of children to become the brains of your robots! How you stole the children of others so you could replace the one that ran away!"

"What are you talking about Al–"

"You were gone from the party the same time that Kalinka disappeared! I finally found the footage you altered! What kind of robot did you put her in Thomas?!"

I did so love such a good show. A masterful piece of work how they all turned on him. Must make you proud.

The people hadn't wanted to believe it at first, but the grainy footage Wily had supposedly restored showed a man-shaped blur roughly Dr. Light's size grab a figure about Kalinka's size. A federal investigation was launched that demanded Dr. Light turn over his creations to be stripped down and inspected to verify Dr. Wily's claim. The man's response...

"I won't let you take my children from me! Rock! Roll!"

...hadn't helped his position. Rock and Roll had made themselves scarce and hadn't been seen since despite a global manhunt and Dr. Light was still incarcerated in a criminal mental institution last Blues had heard. Dr. Cossack had drunk humself into a grieving stupor and could generally be found in a gutter somewhere halfway to a hangover. The only reason Blues hadn't been caught up in that beyond a few nosy reporters looking for a juicy column was the fact that he was Dr. Light's flesh and blood son (by Dr. Lalinde if his memories weren't mistaken, the two never having married and Dr.

Light obtaining custody of Blues), estranged due to some argument or other his Unawake self had had with the man regarding a decision to join the army (who had incidentally given him a medical discharge due to a heart condition that had developed about halfway through training).

As far as the world was concerned, the case was closed.

And then Dr. Wily himself had vanished just as quickly and mysteriously as the children had.

That had been one wild media circus. The man who was supposedly guilty was very securely locked up and his accuser vanished without a trace. With Wily as the sole business owner, the question of what to do with the place had apparently been a hassle until some company bought it looking to capitalize on the mad scientist's image. They'd put a team on getting the place ready when workers started vanishing as mysteriously as Wily himself had. Always at night.

With rumors starting that the place was haunted, the project and the building were quickly abandoned and left to rot for reasons unexplained save for a skeleton security crew. A security crew that, upon Blues hacking the business's record, seemed to have a ridiculously high turnover rate for the night shift. Several former night guards were also listed as missing persons in a few police cases and Blues bet that a few more hadn't even been reported.

Which was why he was here. Estranged or not, whatever issues he had with himself or them, Rock, Roll, and Dr. Light were family. Whatever Dr. Light was guilty of against Blues, he was sure the man wasn't guilty of this. He'd applied as a night guard and had been hired without even being asked in for an interview.

He was going to find out exactly what was going on with this and, if it was possible, clear Dr. Light's name. Steeling himself, he stepped through the front doors to report for duty.

Five Nights At Wily's

14.0) Waltz actually isn't Awake this Loop. Because her Awakening trigger is physical contact with Roll and Roll isn't *in* that Loop. Full modulation lightsabers are a thing in Star Wars, at least in some of the books. It allows the blade to be thickened, thinned, and its length adjusted. On the fly if you're good enough.

14.1) Basically, Robo-Shinji and Robo-Rei have the same kind of weapons tech that Dark Man has. I think this may be a thing for people replacing robots in the Megaverse, that their robot bodies replicate (as best as possible) their favored baseline/Loop abilities using the local tech. They can still use their Loop and baseline abilities, but it's an option that doesn't show off other-universe powers to the local mad scientist(s) and still lets them essentially use what they're used to having.

Also, Gendo himself has started looping relatively recently. This snip was written long before that happened and takes place long before Gendo's first Loop. Trust me, this version of Gendo got everything he deserved.

P.S. Wily's other Robot Masters this Loop are basically the rest of the Original Seven Anchors in robot form (and Unawake):

Dragon Woman=Lina Inverse

Musabetsu Man=Ranma Saotome

Wizard Man=Harry Potter

Reaper Man=Ichigo Kurosaki

Fox Man=Naruto Uzumaki

Moon Woman=Usagi Tsukino

14.2) Gyro's from Jojo's Bizarre Adventure. He… likes to hit on the ladies.

14.X) Narwhals, Narwhals, swimming in th–*is shot*

14.4) This kind of thing probably happens more often than Roll would like.

14.3) Heh. At least no one can doubt that Zero's form is definitely male model this Loop.

14.?) This kind of thing happening *at all* would tick Roll off. To be honest, the looping versions of her family wouldn't be that far behind her.

14.6) I have this headcanon that ever since she started looping, Lina has not encountered anyone outside her home Loop capable of learning the Dragon Slave. At least not to the point they can use it outside a Loop fused with hers the way she does. Yet, after watching her throw it around one Loop she replaced Rock and Roll (no sibling), Dr. Wily still managed to design and build Dragon Man: A draconic-themed robot master with a high-yield thaumic energy core who can fire Dragon Slaves like they're going out of style and in possession of a targeting system that can bulls-eye a small car from halfway across Asia. The Loop with Lina ended before Dragon Man could be deployed, and when Wily Dreamt the information in a later Loop, he was practically consumed by a mania to see the design in action.

7.7.7 continued) Hubris Plus: Do not adjust your sets, no parts have been skipped. The Shadow from Beyond Time is Ouroboros Compliant, but nowhere *near* linear.

14.7) One of Zero's more successful attempts to save Iris.

14.8) Gender flipping issues.

14.9) The Classic timeline is pretty messed up when you think about it.

14.X Alternate) Obviously took place in an aquarium rather than the Arctic.

14.5) A peak at Wily's darker side. Open to anyone who chooses to expand upon it.

Bonus: Because I forgot that this site prevents copy/pasting of story text, here are the parts with wisp text translated in underlines . Nega-wisp speech will remain **bolded** , but without the intermittent *italics* (because I refuse to do that all over again). I may have missed a few small pieces, but all significant wisp dialogue is here. I will also be cutting a lot of text that isn't necessary context to keep the size down.

---

snip

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"I am so sorry!" the creature gibbered in a rush. "When I lost the battle-body that Crazy Wild-Hair gave me to save my brethren from Baldy Nosehair, I panicked! I never meant to harm you! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"Hold on a moment," Tails dug out a handheld device. He probably could have brought out a finished translator, but the 'baseline challenge run' was as good an excuse as any to see how fast he could pull this off from scratch. "I think I can make alterations to this and get a working transl–"

"It's fine," Rock waved off the alien's concern to Tails's astonishment. "No harm done in the end. Out of curiosity, by 'Crazy Wild-Hair', do you mean Dr. Wily?"

"Yes! That's what the Crazy Wild-Hair called himself! He built those bodies for us wisps to save our brethren from Baldy Nosehair who wants our Hyper-Go-On power to do wrong things!"

"You can understand him?" Tails continued gaping.

"Remind me to tell you all later about the Loop where everyone spoke in 'Gibberish'," Rock whispered to the fox before turning back to the alien. "By 'wrong things', do you mean evil things?"

"I do not know this word 'evil'? Is it bad?"

"It's very bad. Very bad things for very bad reasons."

"Then yes, he wants our Hyper-Go-On power for an 'evil' purpose!"

Rock nodded as he walked over to the basic steel robot frame that the alien had inhabited and began to examine it.

"Well?" Tails asked.

"It's interesting..." Rock mused as he scanned the robot. "Aside from apparently being tuned to this guy's personal energy frequency for both power and control, the entire thing is nothing more than a mobile variable weapon system. Though whatever that ray gun did completely fried it, so it's more like a pile of burned-out circuits. It'd take days to get it back in order, *with* the proper equipment."

"Then... I have failed..." the white alien looked despondent before turning to Rock with a pleading expression. "I must ask you brave one, please help us! He is caging our race and draining us of our life force! Please! Save them! Save them!"

"Please do not be concerned if you encounter any screaming aliens," the P.A. system chimed in at that moment. "The screams are how they communicate. Really! I promise."

"Of course we'll help! I'm known as Rock."

"And I'm Tails! What's your name?"

"I am called Yacker."

"Nice to meet you, Yacker."

"Yeah," Tails chuckled. "It's always nice to make new friends."

"Speaking of, I wonder where Sonic went..."

"The blue spiny one?"

"Ah, he'll be fine," Tails waved the concern off casually. "He's probably only up to his neck in trouble after all."

"It continues to amaze me that you can say things like that and still be completely serious."

---

snip

It was a female model with what seemed like a racing fin atop her helmet and a body streamlined for speed.

"Are you here to help?" Rock asked, causing the... Cyan Woman if he didn't miss his guess... to start in surprise before nodding silently as the tremors rocking the ferris wheel of doom died down. "Okay, then, let's go for the eye on three! One... two..."

snip

Rock had cleared the attack in time, but his sudden companion had been in the middle of attacking and hadn't aborted fast enough, getting torn clean in half and reverting to a generic unpainted female model as one of the cyan-colored wisps Rock had seen in Eggman's capsules popped out.

"Oh no!" the alien being gibbered in terror. "Help! Help! Help!"

"Don't worry!" Rock yelled, trying to reassure the alien while he dodged a follow-up swipe. "I can handle this!"

"Really? But... I wasn't strong enough..."

"You're plenty strong!" Rock retorted as he fired his Mega Buster, only for the shots to ping off the re-closed blast panels. "You just don't have enough experience fighting things like this!"

"Then... Then I'll lend you my energy!" the cyan wisp declared before shooting into Rock's body, turning his armor a gleaming cyan all over.

snip

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snip

"The unfiltered starlight from the lovely constellations above is full of deadly radiation!" the P.A. system announced helpfully. "Help yourselves to our complimentary SPF-3000 Starblock. And by complementary, I mean quite expensive."

"Case in point," Rock gestured in the general direction of a speaker. "Hey, Tails! I see you finished your translator. It working?"

"Well, it's not doing the peppermint twist," Tails grinned and made an adjustment to the device.

"Cool," Rock chuckled. "Hey, Yacker. Everyone get away safely?"

"Of course, brave one! He of two tails had them all free in a moment!"

Tails lost his composure and burst out laughing for a moment before getting himself under control and making another adjustment to his device. "Tails of two cities... heh..."

snip

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snip

"I wonder where the ones who were sent here are?" Yacker murmured. "I hope nothing happened to them..."

"Well, I don't know where Eggman might be keeping the wisps," Tails looked up from his device towards the base of the glowing chain in the distance, "but I think that's where the map said the power for this area of the park was."

snip

"DRILL!" was all the warning they got before the cake-like ground before them burst in a geyser of sugary crumbs and several forms emerged. Many were wisps of the white and cyan variety, but there were also yellow wisps with pointy triangular single-eyed heads and red wisps with tri-eyed heads in a shape that evoked the image of flames. Amidst their number was two robots, one yellow and one red. The yellow one had a drill-shaped helmet that extended down over the torso with shoulder-pads that looked like they folded down to make one big drill. The Yellow Man also had arms tipped with drills as well. The Red Man on the other hand had a helmet that evoked flames much like the red wisps and seemed to spurt fire from his joints every few moments.

"You're okay!" Yacker seemed relieved to see the two robots. "I was worried you wouldn't be after the body Crazy Wild-Hair made for me was beaten, but you're fine! How have you fared? I've brought help! The brave one, the spiny one, and the one of two tails have helped us greatly!"

"It was nothing," Rock rubbed his head in embarrassment. "But we are here to help. Do you know where the generator for this place is?"

snip

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snip

"Heh... That's what you get Baldy McNosehair," Sonic chuckled as he looked up the steep incline before turning to his temporary companion. "Ready to make with the magic little guy?"

"Ready!" the orange wisp replied, its two vertically arranged eyes on its ovoid head gaining a determined expression before merging with Sonic.

snip

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snip

"Well, that sounds like a vote for 'through'," Rock grinned. "Do I have a second?"

"I second!" a yellow wisp they'd recently freed chirped before it merged with Rock, turning his armor a bright yellow.

snip

"Hey, wait for me!" Tails yelled as the red wisp merged with him. "BURST!"

A moment later and the flame-wreathed form of Red Man was tearing down one of the tunnels while a red fox-head with glowing eyes and trailing two tails tore down the other in its own wreath of flames.

"Us too!" Yacker and the cyan wisp declared as they followed.

"Well, that glowing generator looks like a pretty obvious target," Rock observed as he looked across the lake of candy syrup at the metal structure with the purple glowing energy arc atop it. There was a land, or cake, bridge across but no other obvious means of access.

"Yeah," Tails agreed, "and it's probably where they're keeping the rest of the wisps."

"Let's go then!" Yacker and the cyan wisp yelled before they, along with Yellow Man and Red Man began to dash towards the cake bridge, only for a massive ship to crash up out of the lake near them.

snip

'Captain Candybeard' pointed his lollipop at Yellow Man and the cannons answered by blasting the charging robot repeatedly. A spray of unpainted metal later and a yellow wisp came tumbling back, looking very dizzy and disoriented.

"That didn't go as planned..."

snip

"BURST!" the flames made enough of a hole in the swarm of Egg Crew for Red Man to dash through and push Tails out of the way. Just in time for the lollipop drill to punch through his own metal body instead, tearing it in half even as it reverted to an unpainted generic male-type frame.

"Woo! That was fun!" the red wisp seemed a bit giddy as he tumbled out of the carnage. "I wanna go on Bake Me Crazy next!"

"Yeah," Rock replied as he caught the red alien, "well, we need to finish this first."

"Got it!" the red wisp nodded before darting into Rock's body, turning his armor a rich red all over.

snip

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snip

"Well, if you've got any ideas, feel free to share them," Roll huffed as the sound of a door opening caught both their attentions.

"I'm sorry!" a floating one-eyed white being cried out in a panicked tone as it held two of its three tendrils up to its mouthless face in shock. "I didn't mean to disturb your recovery!"

"Oh, great..." Bass moaned.

"Don't mind him," Roll smiled as a thought began to form in her mind, "and we'd be glad for the company actually."

"You would?"

"Just what I've always wanted..." Bass groused. "To talk with a floating party favor I can't understand. Yay."

"Oh, hush you," Roll sniped back before returning her smile to the being. "Don't mind him. he's always been a grouch."

"Hey!"

"And, there!" Tails declared as he finished disabling the generator. The glowing energy arc winked out and relay towers nearby began retracting to standby positions before the glow surrounding the chain tethering the mini-planet in place faded away leaving a translucent tether behind.

A skidding sound was heard as Sonic came to an abrupt stop nearby. "Aw, man! I missed everything, didn't I?"

"That's what you get for being slow, spiny one!" the red wisp replied cheerfully, causing Rock and Yacker, shortly followed by Tails since he'd had to read it from his device, to crack up hysterically.

"Man, I'm even missing the jokes now..." Sonic shook his head. "So I take it big blue's getting the hang of the Hyper-Go-On stuff, right?"

"Well," Tails wiped tears of mirth from his eyes, snickering a bit, "he's not getting the hang of horrible body odor, that's for sure."

"I try not to overclock my circuits that much," Rock shrugged as Tails and Sonic burst out laughing this time. "What? Did I miss something?"

"If you did, I did," Yacker shrugged himself.

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snip

"We seem to be losing pressure on the Level 17," the P.A. system informed them. "Please hold your breath against the harsh vacuum of space, until you pass out from oxygen starvation. After that you won't care. Enjoy the ride!"

"That... sounds bad," the yellow wisp noted.

"Yeah, whatever he said," Sonic added. "Rock?"

"I think it's more likely we tripped an alarm, or that this is just part of how this area screws with visitors," Rock noted. "In any case, I'm not reading a drop in pressure. In fact, I think there's a general atmosphere bubble being held in place around this whole fleet for some reason."

"Why would Baldy Nosehair do that?"

"Who knows?" Tails shrugged. "Right now, we need to get through those doors."

"Leave it to me and Yacker," Rock stepped forward. "Ready Yacker?"

"Ready!" Yacker chirped before merging with Rock, turning his armor white once again.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: WHITE BUSTER

"Here we go!" Rock yelled as he charged up and aimed for the doors. "HYPER!"

The massive blast of blinding white plasma blew through the doors like they were nothing, and splashed off a wall of shimmering blue cubes. The wall then faded revealing a large group of wide-eyed wisps and an orange female robot themed like a rocket-pack space adventurer stepped forward and pointed an arm cannon at them...

"RO–"

...only for the cyan, yellow, and red wisps to interpose themselves and begin gibbering quickly.

"It's okay!"

"Yeah, they're with us!"

"They're here to help!"

"They didn't know you were back there!"

Two more robots stepped forward as the Orange Woman lowered her weapon. One a blue male model seemingly made entirely of blocks and a green male model that had a much more rounded body type and evoked the feeling of a stereotypical UFO.

"Wow, three this time. Nice!" Sonic grinned as he noted the group of wisps, composed of mostly white wisps like Yacker, but also a bunch of orange rocket-shaped wisps, the three-eyed cube-headed blue wisps, and the single-eyed UFO-like green wisps.

Yacker chose that moment to pop out of Rock and float over to the three robots.

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"I'm glad to see you! These brave heroes have come to help us like the Crazy Wild-Hair did! One of you can take everyone back to

Planet Wisp in the transport behind us while the others help us free the rest!"

snip

"You know what would be really nice?" Roll asked as Bass yawned with unnecessary drama for the umpteenth time.

"What?"

"If I could talk with my dad back on the planet. Let him know I'm recovering and all. He tends to worry a lot when he doesn't hear from me."

"Sure thing!" the alien being chirped before zooming over to the room's console... and looking at it with total puzzlement. "Um... How do I use this?"

"It's not that hard," Roll smiled patiently. "I'll walk you through it..."

---

snip

"Ohoh, and... and that concludes the Light Speed Electrical Parade."

"Geez, I hate to say this," Sonic grimaced, "but some things you need to slow down a bit..."

"New ship ahoy!" Yacker informed them as they approached the next part of the fleet.

snip

"What do you want this time, Albert?" Dr. Light sighed as he finally answered the call. "I..." Dr. Light blinked as he stared into the single eye of the being on the other end of the line. "You're not Albert Wily..."

"Hello Beard Man!" the being chirped happily. "The nice yellow fighting lady wanted to talk to you!"

snip

"I know, right?" Roll smiled back. "Plus Wily's said we can't have visitors yet, so it's been pretty lonely until this little explorer wandered in."

"Hehe... sorry," the floating white, and likely alien, creature rubbed its proportionately huge head sheepishly.

snip

---

snip

"This is a really big spaceship..." the yellow wisp muttered as he and the others followed the group.

"No kidding," Tails nodded, as did Green Man and Orange Woman. "And Eggman could be hiding anywhere in it."

snip

"Ooof!" Rock grunted and looked up at the one who'd pushed him to see Orange Woman convulsing in the throes of a sinister purple ray from Eggman's craft.

"Orange Woman!" Yacker and the other wisps cried out in alarm as they backed up behind Green Man.

snip

"Hohohohoho!" Eggman laughed. "Not what I was going for, but I'll take it!"

"What did you do to our friend?!"

"Oh, she works for me now!" Eggman continued laughing.

snip

A spray of undecorated steel and a green wisp tumbled into Rock's arms.

"Oh, this is so much better than I could have dreamed!" Eggman gloated. "And I only used a small prototype!"

"Please... save my friend..." the alien muttered before merging with Rock, turning his armor a bright green all over.

snip

The last shot sent his craft tumbling to the ground, where Eggman fell out and landed on his head...

...which popped off, leaving the neck to spark from severed wires.

"He's a robot too?!"

"More like a fake..." Tails sighed.

snip

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snip

"Orange!" Rock called out as he used the Green Hover's forcefield to power through the assault.

"Let's do this!" the orange wisp declared as it merged with Rock, the green wisp leaving his body and his armor turning from green to orange.

snip

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snip

"So, he's using these generators to hold your planets in place with tractor beams?" Rock asked the wisps as the generator shut down, the glowing energy chain turning translucent as power stopped being fed to it.

"Yes!" Yacker confirmed. " The Crazy Wild-Hair said that they'd keep partially working as long as even one was active due to the... the..."

"The circuit," the yellow wisp supplied.

"Yeah, the circuit!" Yacker nodded

"Please, help us free the rest of our brethren!" the green wisp pleaded.

"And stop Baldy Nosehair!" the orange wisp added.

"We will," Rock promised. "Where to next?"

"Planet Wisp!"

"Next stop: Planet Wisp," the transport announced as it closed in on the lush natural mini-planet, its natural beauty at odds with pretty much everything the heroes knew about Eggman and his preferences. "This attraction is currently off-limits, as it is still under construction and may not be dangerous enough for visitors yet."

"That's our home you big gassy... thing!" the red wisp shook one of its tendrils angrily. "We don't want it to be dangerous!"

snip

"Ah," Yacker seemed to inhale the fresh natural breeze as he floated out of the transport, "home sweet..." the white wisp with the spitcurl stopped as he took a look around and saw the heavy construction a

short ways past the green fields with the ominous red and gray metal jutting out of the pristine nature belching smoke into the mini-planet's blue sky.

"What has Baldy Nosehair done to our home?!" the cyan wisp wailed as general exclamations of disbelief echoed from the other wisps.

"Dang..." Rock took in the sight and listened to the metallic sounds of construction going on in the distance. "It looks like Eggman's trying to roboticize the planet. The slow way."

snip

"Brave ones," Yacker spoke up from where he and the other wisps had been conversing, "we need to seek out our brethren and see if they are alright. I pray you will find victory against Baldy Nosehair and free our planet."

"Don't worry," Rock smiled and shot the wisps a thumbs-up. "Go see to your people. We'll take care of Eggman and his 'renovations'."

"We'll be back to help you!" Yacker promised as the small group of former Color Masters sped off.

"Okay," Rock turned towards the construction area and the massive tower that held the chain-like tractor beam at its center, "let's start stopping."

Rock became alert as he heard commotion up ahead.

"Pink Woman's down!"

"Help! Help!"

"Save us!"

snip

"No Pink Woman! You're hurt!" several wisps gibbered as the pink figure, a lanky female robot with long spikey hair all down her back and spike-tipped feet and hands. "You can't fight like that!"

Or rather, Rock noted as the robot tried to brush off the wisps' concern, *one* spike-tipped hand. The other arm had apparently been blown off at the shoulder.

"SPI–" Pink Woman's attempt to get back into the fray was cut off as her severed shoulder sparked wildly and she convulsed. Rock darted forward and caught her as she fell.

"It's okay," he assured the robot, "you did good. I can take it from here."

Pink Woman looked him in the eye and after a moment her form faded to a generic unpainted female model, still missing an arm. A pink wisp with a fierce expression in its one eye and five spiked protrusions from its head floated up level with Rock's face.

"No, *we* can take it from here!" the wisp insisted before shooting into Rock's body, turning his armor bright pink.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: PINK SPIKES

Rock blinked and examined himself. "SPIKES!" he declared, causing several such items to sprout from his hands and feet. *'Hmm... I think this can be charged too for a ranged attack. Interesting...'*

"Can you help us, brave one?" several wisps asked, staring at Rock pleadingly.

snip

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snip

"Oy!" the pink wisp yelled to the other wisps hanging back. "I need a cyan and some yellows over here! Quick! Any volunteers?"

"I'll do it!" a cyan wisp called almost instantly as it zoomed up, trailed by a couple other cyan wisps and a few yellow wisps.

"You're with me," Rock pointed to the cyan wisp and then two yellow wisps, "and you two go help Sonic and Tails. Please."

"The spiny one and the one of two tails," the pink wisp clarified.

"Roger!" the yellow wisps saluted before darting off towards Sonic and Tails just coming out of their Spin Dashes, and the cyan wisp merged with him, turning his armor the same rich cyan color.

snip

"All hail the great hero!" the latest group of freed wisps cheered and bowed to Rock. "And you as well, brave helpers!" they bowed to Sonic and Tails before speeding away down the side of the massive incomplete structure at the center of Eggman's construction efforts.

"Nice to see those guys in high spirits," Sonic grinned, "especially after that Blue Man... are you alright Tails?"

"J-j-just f-fine..." Tails fought back the sudden fit of giggles he'd gotten after reading his device. "W-what were you *snrk* saying?"

"I was saying it's a shame that Blue Man guy took off to look for Yacker and the others. We could probably use his help coming up. Eh... at least the pink wisp and the Crimson Man guy stuck with us, right guys?"

"I wouldn't miss this for anything!" the pink wisp declared even as Crimson Man landed right before the group with a cry of "EAGLE!" and pointed towards the depressed center of the construct.

snip

The lasers started up again, forcing the trio of heroes and pink wisp inside the ring to take cover behind the teacups.

"Great hero! Great hero!" the cry came as a panicking blue wisp shot into the safe zone. "It's terrible! Baldy Nosehair's mean robots took Yacker and the others! I tried to stop them, but they destroyed the body that the Crazy Wild-Hair gave me and–"

"Sonic! Rock!" Tails pointed at the teacups which were glowing ominously. "It's about to blow the teacups!"

"Oh no!" the blue wisp yelped before diving into Rock's body, turning all of his armor the same shade of blue he was known for.

snip

'Okay, this is... pretty bad,' Rock thought to himself. *'At this speed I'm pretty much done for if I hit anything...'* his thoughts trailed off as he spotted a crimson form shooting towards him. It had three determined eyes on a head swept back in a tri-pronged shape that evoked a bird of prey and a trio of tendrils that looked a bit like large feathers. A crimson wisp.

"I apologize, great hero," the wisp gibbered solemnly as it flew up beside Rock, "for being unable to do more." With that, the crimson wisp merged with the blue bomber, turning his armor a deep crimson color.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: CRIMSON EAGLE

"Okay," Rock grinned as he assessed the weapon's capabilities, "I can work with this. EAGLE!" The Mega Man sprouted a pair of glowing crimson energy wings and shot upwards, high, high above the crazed teacup ride mech that was only now slowing its deadly spin, seeing how it had ended up moving itself out into the open air instead of over the high roof. "Alright now," he spoke to the crimson

wisp he was merged with as he finished analyzing the Crimson Eagle's capabilities, "I've got a plan, but I'm going to need you to disengage and follow me down. Be ready to merge with me again when I give the signal. This is going to be close. Got it?"

PRIMARY WEAPON RESTORED TO NORMAL

"I understand, great hero," the crimson wisp stated as gravity realized that Rock was no longer defying it and began pulling him into a freefall.

"Any chance you could stop with the 'great hero' thing?" Rock asked idly as he charged up his Mega Buster and fired on the teacup robot, noting that it closed its blast shields in plenty of time as he charged up again. "My name is Rock," he fired again and began charging another shot. "Or Mega Man if you really want to be formal."

"Thank you for telling me your name, great hero," the crimson wisp stated as Eggman's robot opened its blast shields only to close them again to block the second shot even as Rock fired the third and began charging a fourth, "but I will never deny what you are to us wisps. Not after all you have done."

"It's just..." Rock blushed a bit as he fired again and began charging the next shot, noting that the mech wasn't bothering to open its blast shields this time. "It's kind of embarrassing being praised like that..."

"Then stop doing heroic deeds," the crimson wisp countered as the next shot was unleashed and the mech started growing larger in their view. "Stop being a 'Mega Man'."

"And let people like 'Baldy McNosehair' have their way?" Rock chuckled back as he fired one last shot. "Never. It's time."

"And that is why you are a great hero," the crimson wisp concluded as it merged with Rock again, once more turning his armor a pure deep crimson.

snip

"All hail the great hero and his brave helpers!" a crowd of wisps that had gathered cheered as the generator shut down and the chain-like tractor beam powered down to a barely active state.

"Okay, seriously Tails," Sonic sighed as his friend began snickering wildly again upon reading his translator, "what's the big joke?"

"N-n-noth-thing..." Tails chortled for a moment. "Th-the wisps are j-just...*snrk-k-k* saying h-how thankful *sprrrrt* they are to Mega Man and his *ch-ch-ch* *two* sidekicks! Hahahahahahaha!"

"W-what?!" Sonic began sputtering. "Sidekick?! *Me?!* "

"W-what?" Tails barely managed to fight back his laughter. "You're not *snrk* happy that your 'big bro' is a, heh, big hero?"

"No, no, it's good," Sonic said hastily as Rock began conversing with the blue wisp about something. "Great even."

"The Mega Man will save them!"

"Yeah, the great hero can't lose!"

"He'll show Baldy Nosehair and his robots what-for!"

Sonic slumped dejectedly as praise he couldn't even understand was heaped upon an increasingly embarrassed Rock. "Awesome. Outstanding. Amazing."

---

snip

"Wait, run that by me again?" Sonic asked as the transport whipped from Planet Wisp back to the Tropical Resort.

"A giant drilling robot took Yacker and the others!" the blue wisp explained to nods from the pink and crimson wisps that had joined the group. "It headed straight for the thing holding our planets in place! It's going to do bad things to them, like make them into nega-wisps or worse!"

"In a language I can understand, please?"

"It's fine," Rock patted the dejected-looking blue wisp. "Tails and I know what you said."

snip

---

snip

Rock and the others ignored the P.A. system as they tore through the central resort area, looking for anything that looked like it might be a giant drill robot.

"Where could they be?!" the blue wisp worried.

"I don't know, but–"

THOOM

Rock's reply was cut off as the ground shook, sending himself and Sonic stumbling as they lost their footing.

"Call me crazy," Sonic jerked his thumb in the general direction of where the sound came from, "but I think checking that out is a good place to start."

"Okay, you're crazy," the pink wisp replied as the group took off in that direction. "But it's still a good idea!"

"Please feel free to leave all valuables in your vehicle during your stay here at Eggmanland," the P.A. system advised as they all ran,

"as they will be perfectly safe. In no way will roaming bands of robots break into your vehicle."

"You are such a liar," the crimson wisp rolled its eyes as they all began to hear sounds of a struggle.

snip

"Get him!" the pink wisp shot for Sonic as a large round one-eyed wisp with short tendrils and a decorative ring around its body bounced to a halt at Rock's feet.

"Strike true my friends!" the crimson wisp similarly shot for Tails.

"SPIKES!" Sonic wasted no time revving up a pink wisp-enhanced Spin Dash while Tails took to the air as a winged crimson fox-head trailing two tails with a cry of "EAGLE!"

Sonic's attack missed as the 'Drillinator' took to the air and Tails's attempt at a charging attack resulted in him almost getting swatted out of the sky by the remaining drill-arm.

"Darn it! I..." the indigo wisp shook off its disorientation and spotted Rock, its eye widening in amazement. "Are you the great hero I heard about? The Mega Man?"

"Um... yeah?" Rock confirmed.

"Then please! You gotta save my friends from those two!"

"Those t–" Rock's puzzlement was cut off as the indigo wisp merged with him, turning his armor a bold indigo all over.

Cut Man

"Is that..." Sonic arched an eyebrow. "Is it just me, or is that thing being piloted by Orbot and Cubot?"

"Certainly sounds like it," Tails agreed.

"You give our friends back!" the pink wisp demanded as it zipped up to the robot's face.

"Y-yeah!" the blue wisp added. "Please?"

"Yar-har! Just like that!" Cubot's voice laughed right before the space between the mechanical crab legs began sucking in air, and both wisps with it. "Two more lil' aliens fer Admiral Eggboss!"

"NO!" the crimson wisp cried out in horror.

snip

"Yar! That be a close one!"

"Stop them," the gray wisp whispered before merging with him, turning his armor a pure stormy gray.

snip

"Don't let them get away!" Rock declared as he forced himself to his feet to give chase.

"Wait for us!" the indigo wisp yelled out as it, the crimson wisp, and the gray wisp followed the three heroes.

snip

---

snip

"Despicable cowards!" the crimson wisp spat.

"Give us our friends back!" the indigo wisp added.

"Yar-har! Me matey's right! Ye lubbers can't touch us!"

snip

"Hi Beard Man!" the white wisp cheered as Dr. Light's face appeared on the screen again.

"Oh, joy," Bass deadpanned. "The peacenik himself."

"Be nice," Roll hissed. "I *already* owe you several whacks when we get out."

snip

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snip

"Not today, lubber!" Cubot fumed as the orange armored Mega Man shot forward and swung the Big Chaser's spiked fist in a ferocious backhand. By sheer luck he connected, the impact tableau seeming to hang there for a long moment before the sideways impact sent the Orange Rocketing Mega Man off-course, blasting up and out of the water and into the distance.

"This exotic aquarium contains many rare and endangered species," the P.A. system announced into the stunned silence from both sides, neither quite believing what just happened. "Enjoy them with a delicious soy glaze at the Bucket O'Sushi restaurant."

"Oh, geez!" the yellow wisps' eyes widened comically before they turned and sped away. "Run away!"

"No! Don't run!" the indigo wisp called after them.

"The brave helpers need you!" the crimson wisp insisted, but the yellow wisps were long gone.

"A tactical retreat at this juncture seems wise," Orbot mused as he checked the damage reports. The Big Chaser was very durable, but it had limits.

"Right ye be matey!" Cubot engaged Big Chaser's thrusters. "Full speed that-a-way!"

"Hey!" the gray wisp objected as it spotted their retreat.

snip

---

snip

The omnidirectional energy wave that burst from the mech caught not only Rock and the Magenta Woman, but also a charging Ivory Woman, Sonic, and Tails as well. The gray and indigo wisps were knocked out of Sonic and Tails as all five landed hard on the ground.

"And now for the finishing touch!" Orbot declared as the laser cannons began charging.

Rock grunted as he got to his knees and stared the energy weapons down, realizing that with the momentary sluggishness of his systems from the impact that he wasn't going to get out of the way in time.

"Let's dance!" was all he heard before a wisp merged with him, turning his armor a bright magenta all over.

snip

"That was awesome!" the magenta wisp, its one-eyed head resembling a musical note with three orb-tippe tendrils protruding from the bottom. "I'd dance with you again anytime!"

"That is fine to say," the crimson wisp declared as it zipped up next to Rock, even as the gray and indigo wisps re-merged with Sonic and Tails, and the Ivory Woman crackled with electricity, "however, we must not let these scoundrels get away with the others!"

snip

"Let's show these creeps how to do it with style!" was all the warning he got before the magenta wisp merged with him again.

PRIMARY WEAPON OVERRIDE: MAGENTA RHYTHM

Rock grinned as he took in the multitude of Eggman's robots surrounding them.

"RHYTHM!"

The pursuit of Eggman's lackeys and their armored mech had taken the group to a large open underwater area with a familiar structure inside.

"There it is," a pair of yellow wisps gestured to the generator in the distance.

snip

"In any case, we should keep a watch out for..." Rock trailed off as a massive sub, styled like an angler fish if you tilted your head and squinted just right, rose up in front of their air bubble.

"That?"

snip

"Tell you what," Rock interrupted as a robot similar to 'Candybeard', only modified for underwater operation shot out of the sub. "You two take most of the wisps and deliver your clobbering to the sub while Ivory Woman, myself, and–"

"Me!" the magenta wisp piped up cheerfully.

"–take on the sub's commander."

snip

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snip

"LIGHTN–*SKZZT*" Ivory Woman's attack was cut off rather suddenly and Rock turned in alarm to see the color master with a harpoon sticking out of her optic, having entered from the back of her head, as her ivory form faded to a more generic one and an ivory wisp with a lightning-shaped antenna protruding from its two-eyed head and blocky triangular tendrils popped out.

"Uh-oh..." the wisp noted the surrounding mer-bots before zooming at Rock. "Ack! Help!"

snip

"Oh, dear..." the magenta wisp worried as it popped out of his body, but Rock was already taking stock of his latest weapon's abilities.

'This... This is much more than simple electrical field generation...' he realized before hardening his gaze at the lead mer-bot and speaking to the magenta wisp. "Stay close."

"Whatever you say!"

"LIGHTNING!" Rock whipped his arms forward, sending out crackling whips of electricity that grabbed onto a pair of mer-bot minions. He used one to pull himself forward while swinging the other around in a wide arc that disrupted the other minions trying to close in on him as he slapped both feet into the first minion. With a cry of "LIGHTNING!" he repeated the process, drawing himself closer to the leader as he did.

"Awesome!" the magenta wisp zipped after him as he lightning whipped his way through the school of mer-bots, swinging them into each other as he went. "Outstanding! Amazing!"

snip

"–but he leaned his head out of the way like, nope!" the magenta wisp related to the others excitedly as the group entered the air pocket containing the generator. "And then he lassoed the bad guy with lightning and kicked him into next week!"

"Wow!" the gray wisp looked impressed as the five wisps, the yellow ones who had aided Sonic and Tails having left after the fight, darted ahead of the leisurely stroll of Rock, Sonic, and Tails.

"Truly a skilled hero," the crimson wisp nodded upon reaching the generator.

"'Water' you waiting for?" Eggman's voice sounded over the P.A. system, prompting some of the wisps to make a few rude noises in response. "Climb aboard the exotic aquarium for a boatload of... Ah, who writes this dribble?"

Rock raised an eyebrow at the apparent uncut recording even as the voice of Eggman's lackey Orbot responded, on tape. "You do, boss."

"Oh, you're right! I do!" the voice of Eggman began laughing, getting groans from Sonic and Tails. "Ohohoh! I'm hilarious!"

"Indeed you are, boss!"

It took a few moments for the heroic group to realize that last comment hadn't been from the P.A. system, and by then it was too late. The hermit crabmeat mech had popped up from the other side of the generator and opened its 'mouth' and begun sucking in air, and wisps.

Rock was halfway to forming his arm cannon when the last of the five wisps vanished into the machine with a "Help us he–" .

snip

"Well, how are things go–THOMAS?!" Wily cut off as he entered the room and spotted the face of his rival on the communication screen.

"Hi Crazy Wild-Hair!" the white wisp greeted cheerfully. "I've been talking with the Beard Man!"

snip

Dr. Wily blinked. And then blinked some more.

"Don't look so shocked Albert," Thomas Light sounded far too pleased with himself. "You haven't technically done anything wrong yet."

"Hey, we wisps knew you were kinda nuts already, but you're still better than Baldy Nosehair."

snip

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snip

"The Black Hole Parade starts in five minutes," the P.A. system chimed in. "Don't miss it. It's so entertaining, that it sucks you right in!"

"Yeah, I think we can pass on tha–" Tails began, only to be cut off as a deep violet blur shot into the three's midst and halted right in front of Rock's face

"Who are you?!" the thing, which seemed to be an eyeless violet wisp, instead having a pitch black jagged jack-o-lantern like mouth, with a round head with antenna arranged to make the head look like a spiral, gnashed its darkened mouth in Rock's face aggressively. **"Are you with Baldy Nosehair?!"**

Tails fiddled with his translation device for a bit before shaking his head. "Sorry, even with my Loop experience in making the translator,

I still can't make out what nega-wisps are saying. I can tell you that energy readings indicate a lack of normal Hyper-Go-On energy, replaced with a more negative energy source, as is usual. The process tends to make them extremely aggressive."

"I can see that. And it's more like he's got a rage-distorted voice than true incoherence. Try adjusting for a really thick accent," Rock corrected the fox before addressing the wisp. "We're not with Baldy McNosehair. We're here to stop him and save all the wisps he's captured, including several friends of ours."

"Good!" the violet nega-wisp spat. **"Help us get him for what he did to us! Get him! Hurt him! Devour! Consume! Void! Void! Void!"**

The violet wisp merged with Rock rather forcefully, turning his armor the same angry violet color as the nega-wisp was.

snip

"Ha ha ha! Got them! Got them all!" the nega-wisp laughed as it surveyed the total lack of enemies to be found. **"You'll do! I'm gonna tell the big three about you!"**

"Dude!" Sonic whistled as the wisp sped off. "That was sweet! Come on, let's go trash more of Baldy McNosehair's stuff and find where the geometry duo took Yacker and the others!"

---

snip

KRACKABOOM!

The three heroes shielded themselves from the backlash, and when they realized they hadn't been incinerated, they looked up to see a double-door sized hole blown in the blast doors in the middle of which floated a black sphere, with two bubble-like additions on either side, three small tendrils and a jagged dark pink mouth/visor.

"You coming?" the black wisp asked as the remaining two color masters stepped through the hole, **"or do we have to blow up Baldy Nosehair ourselves?"**

snip

"I don't think that's space sickness I'm feeling..." Rock did his best to steady himself as he watched the conveyors in the ceiling carry capsules of wisps to a center chamber and then dump them in, a dark purple-violet energy flowing out in pipes that went straight into the floor.

"We've been looking for this place..." the black wisp growled thickly, **"Let's blow it to smithereens! Burn! Explode! Destroy! Bomb! Bomb! Bo–"**

"No," Rock shook his head despite wanting to agree with the angry black wisp. "That might hurt the other wisps. We need to–"

A sound of shattering objects was heard nearby and Rock whipped his head to see the Purple Man standing over a lone capsule on their ledge and the group of pointy U-headed purple wisps all sporting jagged black grins.

"Then smash it!" one gnashed.

"Break it!" another gnawed.

"Rend it!" yet another growled.

"Rip!"

"Crunch!"

"Destroy!"

"Frenzy!" they began chanting as they zoomed towards the watching heroes, **"Frenzy! Frenzy!"**

Three of the purple nega-wisps merged with Tails, Sonic, and Rock, the latter's armor turning a deep purple all over.

snip

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snip

The giant mechanical eye with orange-hot barriers and a gravitational field was blown to smithereens on contact and Tails emerged from the destruction unscathed with the black wisp trailing him.

"Boom, baby!" the black wisp chortled as the door out opened up and the others joined them.

snip

"Okay," Rock nodded as he finished calibrations. "Sonic and Tails, keep that thing busy. You," he pointed to the black wisp, "with me. And I'm going to need you," he pointed to the Purple Man, "to throw me and Violet Woman up and over that thing's weapons. Got it?"

"Ha ha ha! We gonna blow him up!" the black wisp cackled as he joined with Rock, turning the robot hero's armor blacker than the depths of space.

snip

"Bwa ha ha!" the black wisp cackled as he and the violet wisp zoomed ahead of the group towards the generator. **"That was awesome!"**

"Still worried me!" Rock called after them, taking his time walking towards the generator.

"Come on slowpokes!" the violet wisp called back. **"Catch up!"**

"Did she just...?" Sonic turned to Tails.

"Call you slow?" Tails couldn't hide his amusement as he fiddled with his adjusted translator. "Either that or a snack."

"I think the first is somewhat less creepy," Sonic shuddered before turning back. "Hey! No one calls me–Look out!"

"Huh?" the two nega wisps whipped around just in time to be sucked up by Orbot and Cubot holding what looked like glorified vacuum cleaners.

snip

"Ohohohoho!"

"Eek! The Baldy Nosehair!"

snip

---

snip

And then the purple form of the last color master was there between him and Eggman's attack, hands spread to catch the jagged jaws.

"FR–"

CRUNCH

Tails found himself staring in horror as the few purple bits of metal sticking out from the closed jaws of similar hue faded to a more plain steel. He felt some relief as the eyeless face of a purple nega-wisp poked itself out of a space between the jaws.

"Ru–"

And then the wisp was sucked down the tendril just like Sonic had been. In the next moment, the doors closed and Tails felt himself rocketing back towards the surface.

Inside one of the containers on the wisp-mech's back, an argument was taking place.

"Maybe if we all push together, we might be able to get one of us out, so it should be you!"

"No! Bleep it, you have to go help the hero you stubborn little...!"

"Your power is the one–" the container they were in shuddered as Rock body-slammed the tendril joint. in the next moment, he'd jumped off towards the central spiked crest.

"Stop arguing Yacks-a-lot! If anyone gets out, it's you!"

A hard kick to the crest forced it back, exposing Eggman's cockpit even as Rock used the recoil to send him directly in front of the clear dome, allowing him to look the Eggman in the eye from point blank range right before he fired.

"Wha–" the containment field holding the wisps in flickered for an instant as Rock's charged shot slammed into Eggman's cockpit and the wisp speaking was shoved out through the momentary opening by the eyeless purple nega-wisp he was arguing with.

"The hero needs you more than he does me... Especially if he's going to save her..."

---

snip

"Great hero! My friend! You have to help!" Yacker pleaded as Eggman recovered control of his machine.

"I know," Rock promised. "I'll get your friends out of there. I promise."

"Not just them!" Yacker's tone was supremely worried. "You have to save mom! He turned her into... into..."

"That's your *mom* ?!" Rock asked incredulously. "He roboticized your mom?!"

"Yes..."

"Okay," Rock's face hardened once more as he made internal adjustments to his Mega Buster. "Don't worry. I know just what to do..."

snip

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snip

A shimmering purple-violet barrier sprang up around the machine, but Rock didn't impact the field due to the mech suddenly picking up speed and backing away from his charge. Landing in a run, the Blue Bomber scowled at his opponent.

"Now what?" Yacker asked.

"Now we wait for him to make a mistake," Rock replied as the jaws on the ends of the tendrils opened up and took aim.

snip

"Go!"

"No, you go!"

"You first! I'll follow!"

"Bu–" The containment field flickered right then as Mega Man's shot hit home and the first wisp took the opportunity to shove the second out.

"Now Yacker!" Rock yelled as he spotted another wisp flying out of the containers on the thing's back. A green one.

"Roger!" Yacker saluted before merging with the running robot.

snip

As the green wisp joined Rock's side, he spotted a third wisp flying out of the machine right before Eggman was able to regain control and right it again.

"Told you I'd follow!" the gray wisp eye-smiled at the green one as she joined the entourage trailing Rock.

"You saw what your power almost did!"

"You have to leave first, for the good of our he–"

"You two are leaving first if I have to bite your faces off to do it!"

"Get going you two! Blow this joint already!"

"I'm gone! You coming?"

"Yeah, yeah... Oh, wow, that was swee–ack!"

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snip

"What happened?" the newly rescued yellow wisp asked the magenta one as Yacker disengaged from Rock.

"Baldy Nosehair wanted to make me take one last shot at the dance master here..." the magenta wisp looked sheepish as she joined Rock's entourage.

---

snip

Yacker popped out as the machine crashed and tumbled along, three colored blurs comprising the orange, cyan, and pink wisps joined his still growing assemblage.

"Almost! Hit him again!"

'Scrap it!' Rock swore internally as he dodged through the storm of sinister lightning and fire solely upon reflexes he was sure he hadn't possessed prior to meeting Sonic and his friends. *'I was* sure *that would have done the trick!'*

"What's wrong?"

"V *OI* **D!** *LIGHT* **NING!"**

"I know you all said one more, but I though that one would have been enough... I..." Rock explained as he hugged the opposite side of the hull path from the electrically crackling void projectile. "I'm afraid if I do any more I might hurt your mom..."

The gathered wisps went dead silent at his words while Eggman kept up the attack.

snip

"Do what you must, hero," one of the wisps finally said.

"You'll save mom. And your friend," Yacker added before moving to merge with him. "I know you can."

snip

"Heh... Get 'em Rock..."

---

snip

"Oh, man..." Yacker huffed, actually looking tired. "I feel a bit dizzy..."

"Hah! I knew you could do it!" the purple wisp yelled as he arrived.

"Hahaha! We all knew it!" the violet wisp added.

"Yeah!" the black wisp cackled. **"You, hero, are the bomb!"**

---

snip

"That actually worked?" Eggman's voice seemed surprised. "I mean, of course it did! I'm a genius! And now you have no way to avoid my final attack!"

"Everyone! The hero needs our help!" Yacker yelled as Eggman guffawed to himself and his final weapon kept charging.

'Careless...' Rock chastised himself.

" **R** igh **t** !" came over a dozen replies to Yacker's call.

"At long last, I've won!" Eggman gloated as Rock grit his teeth.

"All together now!"

"You can't run!"

"Unlimited Color!"

snip

Rock strained his systems trying to Will more power into his blast, and actually felt something respond as the wisps circling him halted their movement and narrowed their differently numbered eyes in fierce concentration.

"OOOO **O** OOOO **O** OO **O** OOOHHHH **H** HHH!"

snip

And there where the flash of light had been, looking somewhat worse for wear, was Sonic. And right behind Sonic, was a roundish pale pink form the size of Eggman's machine. One with three eyes, four soft non-threatening tendrils, and numerous bruises analogous with the damage the wisp-machine had taken.

"M **O** M!" came the excited cry as the field of energy holding Rock in the air vanished, dumping him unceremoniously to the metal hull below as sixteen forms happily mobbed the massive 'mother wisp'.

"Thank you for saving my children, noble ones," the giant mother wisp intoned with minimal difficulty.

"It was nothing, miss wisp," Rock replied, inclining his head in his best approximation of a bow given the current condition of his legs.

"You're enjoying keeping me out of the loop way too much here," Sonic tapped his foot impatiently.

"Why would you possibly think that?" Rock grinned as several of the wisps around them giggled happily.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because you–"

The hull they were on gave a creak and a prolonged shudder that would have registered about 4.2 on the Ricter Scale.

"Ack!" Yacker and several of his fellow wisps yelped.

"Exploding singularities!" the nega-wisps swore.

"My goodness!" the mother wisp gasped.

"Okay, don't panic," Sonic said as the vibrations of the hull increased in intensity.

"This is the perfect time to panic!" one of the wisps yelled back at him.

The space elevator shaft between them and the park suddenly splintered and buckled violently and the main mass of the park began to come closer.

"Okay, that doesn't look like it's going to end well..." Rock noted.

"Ma'am," Sonic addressed the mother wisp, "you take your kids and get as far away as you can. Rock and I will make our own way."

"No, I will–ouch!" the mother wisp's protest was cut off as she gasped in pain from one of the lingering injuries she still had after being restored.

"Yeah, none of that. Go." Sonic insisted. "Rock and I can handle ourselves."

"At least let me do this for you..." the mother wisp said as she extended a tendril to Sonic and sent a flow of Hyper-Go-On straight into his body that left the hedgehog glowing like a nightlight.

"Thanks, now *go* !"

"Fare thee well," the mother wisp said as the other wisps gathered around her to help her zip away.

snip

"No!" the violet wisp angrily slapped away the mother wisp's Hyper-Go-On infused tendril.

"But, what you have become is–" the mother wisp looked worried as she beheld the three nega-wisps.

"Kind of growing on us, mom!" the black wisp chuckled.

"We were afraid this might happen," the red wisp rolled his eyes.

"She just wants to help you!" the orange wisp snapped.

"Oh, stuff it!" the violet wisp snapped back.

"Yeah!" the purple wisp berated. **"If she wants to help then she should help the heroes that helped us!"**

"I am sorry, but I..." the mother wisp trailed off and winced as her injuries once again.

"...Then let us," Yacker spoke up suddenly.

"But even all of your Hyper-Go-On combined wouldn't–" the mother wisp worried.

"Then we get everyone," Yacker insisted.

"Er... What do you mean 'everyone'?" the cyan wisp asked curiously.

"I mean *everyone* !" Yacker clarified. "Every last wisp they helped save! They helped us, and now it's our turn to help them!"

"I like this plan!" the purple wisp cackled as they all began speeding off in various directions. **"I'm excited to be a part of it!"**

Dr. Wily was grumbling over the sixteen 'offline' reports his monitor insisted on showing him in regards to his Color Masters when one of the white wisp aliens zipped into the room and gave him a hug and a mouthless kiss.

"Bye Crazy Wild-Hair!" the white wisp eye-smiled at the man. "We gotta go now! Tell the nice Beard Man bye for us!"

Dr. Wily blinked rapidly as the alien being zipped back out. "What was *that* all about?"

---

snip

"Really, I was kind of hoping for a wisp-ex-machina by n–"

"You called?" the familiar form of Yacker slid in next to them. Followed by several more of varying colors. Rock looked back over Sonic's shoulder to see thousands of wisps of every type, including nega-wisps, forming a network around the burning remains of Eggmanland as it plummeted after them.

"Like my children reminded me," the form of the mother wisp joined them, "you helped us. Now we shall help you."

"Oh wow..." Rock breathed in amazement at the sight as every last wisp, including Yacker and the mother wisp, began glowing, forming a shell of energy that Eggmanland slammed into... and halted.

"Dang impressive, ain't it?"

"Yeah..."

snip

The party was in full swing all across Mobotropolis. Wisps of all colors were everywhere dancing and gibbering at anyone who caught their interest. Members of all known native sapient races had been surprised at first, but had gone with the flow.

The fact that they hadn't left immediately wasn't quite so surprising to Sonic and his friends given the lingering injuries the mother wisp had wanted to recover from first. What was surprising to them was the fact that a relatively small number, a few hundred (including three in particular), of the nega-wisps had elected to remain that way rather than be restored to normal. There had been some concerns, but as things turned out, they really were just wisps of a different color. A bit more of a temper, some garbled vocals, and a decent prankster streak, but they were still the lovable wisps that the rest were.

"You really have to go so soon?" Rock asked the fully-healed mother wisp.

"Of course," the mother wisp replied, looking fondly over to where the brave sixteen former Color Masters were again performing a blow-by-blow replay of the daring rescue across Eggmanland and the stolen mini-planets the wisps called home. "This is not our home. We came here by accident and do not belong here with you. We appreciate all your help and hospitality dear heroes and friends, but it is time that we returned to our place."

"Man but we're gonna miss you guys," Sonic added, still not understanding the words, but getting the general feel of the message anyway. "Feel free to drop by anytime!"

"We will!" Yacker replied as he zipped over, his part in the retelling complete for now. At the moment, the crimson wisp had taken over while the purple wisp acted out the part of one of Eggman's robots to cheers from wisp, human, and mobian audience members alike. "But please let us finish this story first, mom?"

The mother wisp looked at the pleading expression on Yacker's face and gave a sigh of concession. "Oh, very well."

"Yay!"

Collapses Wow. I really should have done this as I wrote the story originally. But I seriously forgot about ff dot net's prevention of copy/pasting story text. Maybe I could have just put wisp-speak in brackets and saved myself the trouble completely, but I liked the idea of using actual (translatable) gibberish. So there you have it. The re-translated wisp dialogue (with a spelling correction or two thrown in both here and the original chapter). Until next time:

WHYPOL!

RASOL!

WRIRR!

FULCH!

LENGOT!

CUFO!

SPIKOS!

WHEVOL!

OAGRO!

ACHOLEID!

RIDDNICK!

LHYTHM!

QUAKO!

MEID!

BLONZUPP!

FEMF!

UNRIMITOW CEREL!

Mega Loops 15

Mega Loops 15

15.0 (OathToOblivion)

Rock Awoke...and was immediately confused by the body he was in. *'That's strange,'* he wondered. *'This chassis doesn't seem like my normal one at all.'* That was when the Loop Memories came in, and everything became clear. Apparently, in this Loop variant Dr. Wily didn't exist, which was sort of a relief. *'At least I don't have to deal with those weird Loops with his cultural kicks.'* However, despite Wily not being there, he was still wary of the person that had helped Dr. Light build the initial Robot Masters. After all, Giovanni Rocket was also not someone to tangle with. At least it explained why he looked like the Gen III version of Red.

"Rock?" Suddenly, Roll's voice rang out from behind.

"Yes, Roll?" he answered as he turned around.

"Why do I look like Leaf?" she asked with a glower from under the Gen III protagonist's bucket hat.

"The same reason I look like Red; Giovanni's replaced Wily," Rock sighed. He then changed the subject. "By the way, has Blues signaled in yet?" he queried. Roll shook her head. That meant that either he wasn't Awake or he was off in some other Loop again. Just as she was about to ask Rock about something, Dr. Light's voice interrupted.

"Rock? Roll? Could you come here for a bit?"

"Coming, Dr. Light!" the pair of DLNs said before exiting the part of the Lab they had woken up in.

---

15. Sneak (OathToOblivion)

'No. Not again!' Zero thought in anguish. Once again, he had failed to convince Colonel to stand down. And there was Iris, standing there with accusations and grief and heartbreak in her eyes, holding Colonel's core in her hands. Zero felt paralyzed, as much as he did want to stop it. It was almost as though the universe was telling him, "Wait."

"Good bye, Zero," Iris whispered, about to fuse with the core, a feat which would utterly destroy her. But before she could do that, a shot rang out, knocking the core out of her hand.

It wasn't Zero. His aim with Busters was kind-of-sort-of *horrible* . That's why he normally used the external Buster Shot, which had a scope. No, it was someone else entirely, who disabled their invisibility. A certain New Generation Reploid in black who wielded twin pistols.

"Axl?!" Zero reacted in shock. How had he known that they were there?!

Axl ignored him, surprisingly enough, and looked directly at Iris. Uncharacteristically for the energetic Reploid, he was completely serious. "So, you're Iris, Zero's girlfriend, huh?" he said rhetorically. "I've heard a lot about you, girlie. You know that doing what you were about to do probably would have killed you, right?"

"I don't care!" Iris yelled in grief. "My brother is dead...I-!"

"I know what you're going through!" Axl interrupted. "You're scared, and angry, and your heart feels broken. Believe me, *I know* . But at least you weren't the one who ended your brother's life!" he said with

emphasis. Zero saw it in his eyes. The anguish he had felt defeating Red and leaving him behind for dead when the Crimson Palace self-destructed. An anguish that should not *be there* . At least, not in this Loop. Which meant...

"I-I..." Iris stuttered.

"What about Zero? Do you think he *wanted* to kill Colonel?! Everything I've ever heard about those two says that they respected each other tremendously. If Zero killed Colonel, then Colonel must not have left him any choice in the matter! And you!" he added. "You were going to throw your life away for nothing?! You'd hate Zero for something your brother brought on himself?! I can't see what he saw in you!" he yelled critically.

"THAT'S ENOUGH, AXL!" Zero yelled angrily, drawing both of the other Reploids' attention. Zero then softened. "Iris can hate me if she wants," he said softly. "Colonel might not have left me a choice, but it was still my blade that took his life, and that's something I can never forgive myself for."

Then, he turned to Iris. "Iris, hate me if you want. But please, don't throw your life away. Not like this. Colonel would want you to live on in his memory," he pleaded.

Iris looked down, conflicted and still struggling through her grief. "I...I could never hate you, Zero. I...I just..." she whispered. Her tears came to a crescendo, and she flung herself at Zero, hugging him as hard as she could. "Oh, Zero, what am I going to do?! My brother...he's gone!" she wailed.

Zero was shocked for a second, before gently returning the hug. "I'm sorry, Iris. There's nothing I can ever do to make it up to you," he whispered. "But right now, there's something I have to do."

"What's-?"

"Sigma's returned again. Everything that's happened has his fingerprints all over it," Zero said decisively. "I have to stop him, before everyone on Earth suffers because of him again."

"Sigma...then, the reason my brother died, and Repliforce is being hunted-!" Iris realized.

"Yeah, it's all because of him. Go back to Abel City, Iris. I'll take care of him, and then we'll talk about things, all right?" he asked hopefully. Iris was silent, and removed herself from Zero's arms. She look askance at Colonel's fallen core for a second, before her gaze hardened.

She turned back to Zero. "All right. I'll go, and return to being your Navigator. Go after Sigma, Zero, and terminate him with extreme prejudice!" she declared, before she teleported out. Zero looked at where she had been with shock, before smirking.

"Heh, you're definitely Colonel's sister, Iris," he chuckled, before returning to the Donphan in the room. "Axl...thanks. I'm not sure what I would have done," he admitted.

"No problem, Zero! Not every day someone like me gets to save someone like you!" Axl smirked, spinning his pistols and holstering them. "Although, if you want to explain why we're in a completely parallel universe, now would be the time. What *is* a Pokémon anyway?" he added.

"Heh. I'll explain on the way. Come on, let's go stop Sigma," Zero offered.

"What, me and you?" Axl asked in surprise. "Aren't you supposed to be doing this with X?"

"He's busy. And since when were you so hesitant? Don't tell me you're all bark and no bite," Zero teased, before rushing further ahead. Axl started in surprise, then dashed after him.

"As if! Get back here, old man! I'll make you eat my dust!" he called.

15.1 (Voidable)

Blues Awoke, and found that he had no sense of anything around him. A total blackness surrounded him, leaving him unable to grasp what was around him, and so he did the only thing he could do in such a state, and Pinged.

Ichigo and Rukia looked up at each other, showing in their eyes that both felt the Ping, yet didn't believe it. Rukia glanced out the bedroom window and said, "That Ping felt... off."

Ichigo nodded and said, "It did. It was subdued, like it was from Soul Society instead of the living world. Someone probably Awoke without a body, or something similar." Awakening without a body was not unheard of, though it wasn't common either.

As they walked to Urahara's shop, as was their routine for beginning a Loop, they felt another Ping,And it felt stronger than it did before. Without a word to each other, they quickened their pace. When they got there, they could not see any spirits of any sort, but once again, they felt a Ping. They stared right at the box that Kon was typically in. Ichigo stared at the box, because he could swear he felt that Ping screaming "I'm here!", he dug out Kon's pill, and paid an unawake Kisuke Urahara for the 'Soul Pill'. As Ichigo and Rukia walked out of Urahara Shōten, once again, confirming his suspicions, there was another Ping, this time it was right in the ancient Anchor's hand. He off-handedly stated "I'm going to hurry back, sorry." and promptly apparated back into his empty room. He made sure to lock the door, and without any hesitation, he swallowed the Soul Pill.

Blues blinked. He blinked again. Then he blinked some more. Then he was smacked in the back of the head. "...Ow?" Blues blinked yet again as the unexpected sensation of pain pulsated in his cranium. Looking around, he saw the orange-haired Ichigo in his Shinigami garb and said, "Hello? Sorry, this Loop is a bit unusual for me."

Ichigo snorted. "Yeah, I can imagine Waking up inside a pill is unusual. Anyway, what's your name?"

"Blues Light."

Ichigo grunted. "I don't suppose you'd be Rock's brother?"

"That would be me. You're Ichigo Kurosaki, right?"

Blues sidestepped again as Grand Fisher took a swipe at him, but still got scratched nonetheless. At least it wasn't Ichigo's body, as Rukia made a Gigai for him, and did a surprisingly accurate job with his proportions. Blues wasn't used to fighting anything without his normally mechanical body, but he supposed that developing powers not strictly limited to how his body was built was a good idea. Ichigo did point out that due to the nature of the Loops, Blues wasn't going to be a robot for every single one of them, and he needed to learn how to defend himself for when he wasn't robotic. Big Fisher lunged at Blues again, this time catching him dead-on.

"I have you now, you little brat!" Grand Fisher boasted, with Blues on the ground.

Blues grunted, not enjoying the amped sensation of pain his human-like body granted him, and spat back, "You know, bragging will get you nowhere." Blues then proceeded to push Grand Fisher off, despite the huge difference in size, and kicked him in the face.

The Hollow's mask started to crack, and Grand Fisher went on to say, "Impressive, you actually banged me up a bit. But you're not even a Shinigami, your strength cannot extend much farther, *boy* ."

15.2 (Bigou, with some edits for story flow by me)

This time around, the man usually named Thomas Light ended in a strange loop.

First, he wasn't American or Japanese like usual, but French. Somehow, that also changed his name into Frédéric Lumière.

Second, he wasn't doctor in robotics, but one of the two host of an educational TV program called 'It's Not Witchcraft'. His co-host was a unAwake man currently named Jamy C. Chocottes, but very recognizable as a variant of Dr. Albert W. Wily.

Each show started the same way: He was seen with his co-host in their mobile lab, (located in a truck trailer) and soon asked a question. Something like "Hey Jamy, can you explain to me how robots work?" And after a positive answer, they open a door to join Marcel, their driver, to be transported to their destination, while the generic started, showing their magnificent white truck. For the robot example, Marcel drove them to MIT.

Yes, they somehow got to Massachusetts by roads, **from France.** The audience likely didn't think too much of it, assuming that was just the magic of TV shows.

…But the fact Marcel looked a lot like a human version of Auto might have explained a few things.

From then, Wily stayed in the lab, explaining things using mock-ups, sketches and models, while Light was in the field, either interviewing an expert on the day's subject, demonstrating what Wily explained, or to let the audience safely observe some natural phenomenon from their home.

Light's field activities usually prompted new questions, answered by new explanations from Wily, making the show's focus go back and

forth between the two.

Often during the switch between field and lab, the disembodied voice of Roll, currently named 'the tiny voice', completed Wily's explanations with either some additional facts, sometimes adding some questions of her own.

The unAwake Wily seemed to enjoy explaining things a way everyone could understand, making his genius be acknowledged nationwide. Neither Roll nor her father knew when they might experience such a Loop again, but they still considered this 'Not-Witchverse' some sort of holiday.

15.3

Harry blinked as he Awoke back on the oh-so-familiar train and recognized the boy sitting across from him.

"Hey Simon," he smiled, "haven't seen you in a while. What was it this time?"

The Anchor most renowned for going above and beyond the possible, many times blowing himself and any other looper present to Eiken or Hogwarts, smirked back. "You remember that Uzumaki place I told you about?"

Harry winced hard. Simon's branch, Gurren Lagann, ran on Spiral Power to do all of its incredibly impossible feats. Uzumaki was a quarantined Loop due to the fact that it had a viral madness-inducing force that infected anything and everything through spirals. Even just *looking* at a spiral for too long could give it enough of an opening to infect a person's mind. The time Simon had wound up there due to some system error in Yggdrasil… That was still one of the worst horror stories of the Loops he'd ever heard. Poor Simon had apparently needed multiple Loops just to recover. "Ouch."

"Yeah, it kind of replaced the Anti-Spirals last Loop," Simon admitted.

Harry double-winced. "So you just crashed the Loop rather than deal with it?"

"Actually..." Simon began, only to be interrupted by a dual shout as two new occupants entered the car.

"Gurren Lagann is the best. Loop. *Ever!* " the familiar voices of Rock and Roll Light cheered as they joined Simon and Harry in the train car.

"...these two took care of it," Simon finished, grinning widely. "Punched the resulting eldritch horror in the face so hard that we ended up here."

15.4 (Scorntex)

Peter Parker frowned as his Loop memories rolled in. He looked down at himself, at the red and blue armor which naturally came with spider-web patterning.

"Huh," was all he could say to that.

Apparently in this Loop, he was the product of a combined experiment between his baseline father, Uncle Ben, and two people he didn't recognise, but one who from sheer experience alone looked like he was five seconds away from cackling hysterically. Peter knew a mad scientist when he saw one.

This wasn't the weird part. That Loop where he'd replaced Kon-El had helped with this sort of thing. Nor was the fact that his father was in fact still alive, which in all the Loops he'd been through he honestly couldn't remember happening before.

The fact that he was a robot, on the other hand, was weird. Apparently he'd been designed for something different, menial tasks if the memories were any indicator, before a spider had bitten a highly experimental piece of tech that his father had meant to install in him while he was being "built", giving him his webs and spider-sense.

And at some point very recently, evil mad scientist had turned evil. Somehow his dad and uncle had been surprised by that part. During all this, Uncle Ben wound up a casualty, and Peter had made his father redesign him with super-strength and agility. Which was where he found himself now, waking up just after the redesign.

"How do you feel?" his father asked, hesitantly.

"I..." Peter frowned, staring down at his arms. There was a small band of silver cartridges just below his wrists, right where his webshooters usually were. And from what his Loop memories had suggested he'd been expecting organic ones again.

He looked up at his father, a determined look on his face.

"Amazing." He couldn't help himself with that one.

Whoever this mad scientist was, he was going to regret betraying Peter's family, he was going to regret killing Uncle Ben.

Whoever this Albert Wily was, he was going to regret messing with Spider Man.

15.? (Zerorock41)

Zero Awoke at the start of his loop. " *Damn it. Not early enough to save Passy. Oh well.* "

Zero began steeling himself mentally, preparing to go through this loop as the most bada**, stoic, awesome warrior persona he could muster up. He had just come off a loop with the Manly Guys after all.

That was the plan... until he heard Ciel speak.

"Zero... The legendary Toucan..."

Looking down at himself, Zero almost swore.

"Oh *come on* !"

15.5 (Zerorock41)

"You must be Zero. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Harpuia, one of the four Guardians of Mast-"

"Oooh. You have pretty laser swords like me."

That had caught the Sage of Thunder off guard. He didn't expect the Reploid girl before him to interrupt him like that. He continued, "...Yes, I do. Anyway, your foolish behavior for siding with the Mave-"

"Are we gonna fight now?"

"Huh?"

"You attacked my friends, the Resistance. That means you're a meanie that needs to be stopped."

Harpuia was confused. **This** was the mighty Reploid that had been causing so much trouble for him, his siblings, and their armies? This adorable little blonde Reploid? Still, a threat was a threat and she had challenged him...

"Very well, if you wish to continue aiding those Maverick fools, then you shall be destroyed no matter how adorable you are!"

"You think I'm adorable?" Zero asked sweetly.

Flustered, Harpuia nearly facefaulted right there. What was this Reploid girl doing to him?

- *Nearby*-

Looking from afar, the Cyber elf X was enjoying himself, watching as the childish, feminine Zero wiped the floor with the clearly distracted Harpuia. All the while, he kept his recording software on the whole time. This would make excellent blackmail material for the looping Zero.

15.6

Blues sighed to himself as he entered the modeling company, wondering just what was up with his latest case. His client might have seemed a bit flakey on the surface, but with every person he interviewed and every answer he got, the more he was certain something was up. Something beyond Police Detective Archer trying to warn him off the case. The DeGreasys were definitely hiding something, regardless of whether they were telling the truth about his client, and the way Carol Masters stuck up for his client seemed to back his client's story that the DeGreasys were shorting him on his contract.

But there was still one person left to talk to. His client's estranged wife. Depending on the nature of the estrangement, this could either prove enlightening or disastrous. And there she was now. Subconsciously exuding a sensuality that would have had any nearly man she wanted wrapped around her little finger with minimal effort.

No wonder everyone kept wondering why she was with his client.

"Jessica Rabbit?" he asked, getting the woman's attention with a swift turn of her head that sent her perfectly groomed red hair whipping around in sensual waves.

"Ah..." the woman seemed surprised to see him, but even so her voice cooed out with the sultriest of undertones. "So you're the one who has replaced Valiant..."

"I suppose I am," Blues reminded himself that the adult model toon probably couldn't help enticing others. "Which means you know why I'm here. Your husband Roger hired me to look into his contract with the DeGreasy brothers."

"Yes, this variant again..." the woman sighed in a way that would have most men needing a cold shower. "Not my favorite... I take it you've already caught on that something's up?"

"I have, though I'm getting the feeling that I don't know the half of it."

"You don't mister..."

"Call me Blues."

"Of course. Mister Blues. Normally I love my honey bunny more than anything... Most Loops he wouldn't hurt anyone, not willingly, but this version of him... Unawake..."

"Is dangerous if pushed too far? Like he believes the DeGreasy brothers have done?"

"Is fully capable of murder, mister Blues. And he's also in very grave danger if his plan is allowed to go forward. Particularly if he still has his teakettle."

"DeGreasy mentioned Roger's teakettle..." Blues realized. "Seemed to want it pretty bad... What is up with it?"

"Now that... That is quite the story. If you've got the time, I'll tell you. And I hope you're pure enough of heart to do what needs to be done

when I'm finished..."

15.7 (Thanatos's Scribe)

Zero tensed in anticipation as Weil fused with Ragnarok's core. While he had been having Loops in this era a lot less than in X's baseline Loop, the Loop had been entirely baseline with a few exceptions, such as Zero sabotaging Ragnarok early in the Loop to keep it from destroying Neo Arcadia.

"Now, behold my ultimate form!," Weil said as the light faded away, only to reveal...

...a giant wheel. Zero looked at the wheel in confusion. The wheel was a simple gold and red wheel, with the usual cables that came with the form attached to the wheel's axle. However, the only aspect of the wheel that was an apparent threat was the sheer size of the wheel, its diameter easily 40 feet in length despite having no spikes or cannons.

"Now, DIE!" Weil declared as he revved up before charging at Zero. However, the insane Reploid was quickly defeated as Zero cut off the cables on the right side of the Weil Wheel, before whipping around and cutting the other cables off with a well-thrown Boomerang Shield from his subspace pocket.

With nothing holding him onto Ragnarok, Weil could only let a scream of rage as he rocketed over the mass of Ragnarok he and Zero had been on. With Ragnarok collapsing due to it not having a power source, Zero only shook his head as he was teleported by to the Mobile Resistance Base. While this was one of the few times he had survived past his baseline 'death', he was definitely noting this Loop as one of the easiest he'd done so far.

15.8 (DrTempo)

"NANOMACHINES, S–"

BLAM

Cue a large hole in one Senator Armstrong's chest, courtesy of a certain red armored Maverick Hunter.

"Well, that'll beat Spike's record for an Armstrong kill."

Kicking the ass of this guy in a creative fashion was an occasional pastime among some Loopers. Zero'd heard Ranma had once used Hokuto Hundred Crack Fist to break Armstrong's armor. Blowing smoke from his Buster, Zero smiled.

This Loop'd been FUN...

15.8 & ½

"Zombies!" the steel dynamo/fighting scientist known as Atomic Robo complained as yet another of the walking dead tried to fruitlessly chew on his metal exterior. " *Why* did it have to be zombies? Why couldn't it be a plague that turns people into, I don't know, brightly-colored ponies or something? The undead are gross, and I think their decaying remains are seeping into my innards or something."

"Hey," a blond pompadoured man with a muscular torso several times the size of his lower body and wearing sunglasses flexed his muscles and blasted several undead off of him in a burst of either chi or chakra and continued punching several more in the face, "at least you're immune Brobo. If I, ah, hadn't trained to coat my body with my, ah, life force I'd be kinda infected by now."

"Everyone's infected, Johnny!" Robo yelled. "This disease is airborne! Anything with lungs is infected! It doesn't matter if you get

bitten, just if you die!"

"Halt there, citizens!" a relatively thin man in a trenchcoat and fedora held out a hand in a 'stop' gesture. A hand that was on the end of a mechanical arm sprouting from the top of his hat. And only serving to draw the attention of the walking dead. "You are in violation of the law for rioting, destruction of city property, assault with intent to eat, and decaying without a license. I must ask you to disperse or I will be forced to place you all under arrest."

"Damnit!" Robo swore as the undead swarmed towards the cyborg detective known as Inspector Gadget, whose actual arms were occupied keeping what looked like an armored brown police SUV jacked up so a young teen girl with shoulder-length dark purple hair and an anthropomorphic rat in a red martial arts gi could change its tire. "Someone stop them!"

"Oh, why not let him get eaten already?" a short man with a grayish violet complexion, pointed ears, and an outfit that would label him as a villainous wizard in practically any other situation asked as he conjured a blast of wind to blow away zombies coming from the other direction.

"Because I don't want to deal with a cyborg zombie who can summon an endless variety of ridiculous, yet still possibly lethal, contraptions from any part of his decaying body!" Robo yelled. "Similar reason why we don't just let them eat you!"

"Not cool, Vaati, not cool..." Johnny admonished.

"Oh, all right," the wind sorcerer sighed as he summoned a blast of wind to blow away the zombies attacking Gadget.

"Good to see even the undead can listen to reason," the oblivious detective nodded.

"Why do they even want him anyway?" Vaati huffed. "It's not like he actually has any brains to ea–"

"Cowabrraaiinnssga..." the moan was a lot closer to Vaati than he was comfortable with and he turned to watch a quartet of decaying humanoid turtles leap at him with far more agility than the average zombie possessed. Readying a wind spell in panic, the attempt was cut off by a thrown sai that forced him to cast a minor shield instead. One that, in his haste, was inadequate to stop a close range assault.

A blur of red and brown flashed ahead of him at the last moment and the four zombie turtles were sent flying back.

"Cutting it a little close there, aren't you?" Vaati asked.

"Lay off, man," Johnny scowled. "Those are his–"

"They *were* my sons this Loop," the ninja rat known as Splinter corrected as he engaged the zombie horde. "Now they are something... far less. In any case, we must hold until our transportation is repaired so that we can find a proper stronghold."

"With a lab so I can research a cure!" Robo reminded while half-covered with zombies as he and Johnny held the line as best they could.

"Not my fault one of them carried explosives," a mechanical voice sounded from the armored SUV.

"No one's saying that Carl," the girl still working on him soothed.

"Hotaru is correct, my friend," Gadget kept his position holding the immensely heavy vehicle steady. "You do your duty well."

"Yeah, well," Robo noted as more zombies arrived to reinforce the already large horde, "we're all going to be on daisy-pushing duty if this keeps up too much–"

Rather suddenly, a large beam of energy blasted a hole in the shambling hordes and the rest were encased in a field of glowing

energy and lifted up off the ground before being slammed together with a loud crunch of bones.

Two figures landed before the group. One looked like a boy in modern green and lime armor with blue shades in his helmet and a v-shaped crescent on his forehead, carrying a large red object that morphed from a cannon into a jackhammer as he landed. The other looked like an anthropomorphic hedgehog with silver fur, thin limbs, and glowed with the same energy that had smashed the zombies together.

"Don't be afraid," the hedgehog said. "We've–"

"Oh, please tell me you've come from the future with information to develop a cure before the entire world is consumed by the undead!" Robo interrupted in a rush.

"Er..." the green-armored figure couldn't be seen blinking in astonishment like his partner, but his voice gave off that sensation anyway. "Yes, actually. I'm Quint and this is Silver."

"Yes!" Robo pumped his fists into the air. "We have a chance to stop this insanity!"

"I hope so," Hotaru emerged from under the armored SUV, Carl, and dusted herself off. "I rather dislike having to blow up the planet."

"Uh... blow up the...?" Silver blinked owlishly.

"Get down, please," Hotaru asked nicely as she summoned a polearm and her outfit turned into what amounted to a cross between a swimsuit and a japanese girl's school uniform. After a moment of seeing the others drop to the ground, Quint and Silver followed suit. "Cutting Glaive," she spoke as she swung the weapon. They felt a wave of something pass over them and turned to see a newly arrived horde of zombies cut in half by the attack and turn to dust. "Oh, Johnny!" Hotaru gasped and they looked back to see her worrying

over a few bite marks on the beefy man's arm. And then she waved her hand over the marks and they healed like they'd never existed.

"Alright everyone," Carl the SUV spoke up as Gadget set him down, "I'm fixed so hop on in and hold on tight."

"Right," Robo nodded. "The sooner we fix this, the sooner we can put it behind us because, man, I'd hate to be looping from this place."

"Indeed," Splinter nodded. "Quint, see if you can mount your weapon to Carl's door. Vaati, you join Silver atop Carl and help clear the way."

"Man, why do I gotta..." the wind sorcerer trailed off as he caught the look the rat was giving him and swallowed nervously. "I mean, yes sir..."

15.9 (Leonite)

Rock leaped into the air. He smirked as the gate barely opened in time to let him in. "You're getting slow on the activation times, Wily!" He shouted. It had been an interesting loop so far. It was international robot tournament, but instead of Mr. X the person who had kidnapped the robots was a person named Dr. Faker. It was a silly disguise for Wily and he hadn't fallen for it for a second, the man looked like Wily with blond hair dye and a spiked wig! More effort had been put into the disguise though, Dr. Faker was apparently yet another world famous robotics expert, this time out of Japan. It was probably the cause of 4 different robot masters being stolen, while the other half remained the same.

Standing in front of him was one of those robots. Dressed in rather over dramatic white and yellow armor, with a wide helmet on his head which covered his face, showing only two red eyes, and two large swords he had sheathed. "Utopia Man, you don't have to work

for Faker!" Rock shouted... it didn't usually work, but asking his opponent not to fight was usually worth the–

"OK," Utopia Man said.

Rock blinked. "What."

"I said 'OK'," Utopia Man repeated. "Dr. Faker definitely isn't feeling the flow. Not my sort of thing."

A loudspeaker crackled, flaring to life. "You stupid little robot! Fight Mega Man! Your master orders it. Do as I–" The loudspeaker cut off as one of Utopia Man's swords sliced it in half, having been thrown at it.

Utopia Man sighed... and grabbed his helmet, pulling it off. Underneath revealed... a bot that had to be around Rock's age, design wise. Red and black hair spiked in a way that should be impossible and a wide grin on his face. "Sorry about that, Faker usually starts off evil. He's got good intentions at heart," the gold and white robot explained. "I hope you were Awake enough to avoid a slice like that. I'm Yuma." He held out his hand for a handshake.

Rock grinned and grabbed his hand, giving it a small shake. "Good to see another looper, you can call me Rock." Rock said.

"You're a new one, never ran into a loop like yours before," Yuma admitted. He looked over himself, before he spotted... a strange pendant on his helmet. With a grin it popped free, revealing some rope, quickly going around Yuma's neck. "Hey... can you change your visual spectrum thingies? Got another looper I want you to meet."

Rock raised an eyebrow... but he started shifting through the colour and light spectrum... until he finally spotted a pale blue being floating next to Yuma. He seemed to be saying something, but it took a bit of tuning of his own audio sensors to finally hear him. "...and of all the luck you get stuck as a robot that can make a shield and fight in

close combat in a loop where guns are the big thing. Truly, it astounds me," the being said.

"Well, you don't have to make me look like a moron in front of the new guy, Astral!" Yuma shouted.

"I would not if it wasn't for the fact that you make it so easy," Astral insisted

Rock chuckled at that. "Hey, don't feel so bad. You could be a Robot Master focused on springs," he insisted. Why Wily made Spring Man was still a little mystifying.

Yuma sighed... but grinned. "Ah well, robots are still a change. My loop is all about card games."

"Card Games?" Rock asked.

"They can be serious business," Yuma insisted.

"No, it's just that... I think I've met another looper from your universe before. Yugi?"

Yuma grinned. "Sorta... the Yu-Gi-Oh! branches are close together, but we each have a seperate, if easily fused loop. Yugi is an Anchor of one of those branches," Yuma explained. "Why, who was he?"

"Um..."

Rock simply stared at the other Robot Master. "So your name is..."

"Another Pharaoh Man, yes," the blushing Robot Master said. "Just take my weapon and let me find a patent office, I don't care if I'm a robot, I'm changing my name"

"No one special." Rock insisted.

Yuma raised an eyebrow at this, but shrugged. "OK, but be careful of my friends. I think at least my friend Shark is looping here too, but he could be anything." Yuma said.

"So you're Shark Man?"

The robot master in front of him, looking simply armored in purple but with an oversized shark head for a helmet. "Gee, how'd you guess?" Shark asked, sarcasm dripping from his muffled voice, the helmet actually so big it made it a little hard to hear him. "This is some Admin's way of getting revenge on me, I just know it."

15.4 (Scorntex - continued)

Everything had been going swimmingly since Doctor Wily's last foiling, at the hands of Mega Man, Mega Woman, and their friend Spider Man, a robot created by an old friend of Doctor Thomas Light, who had proved an able ally in the struggle against the reprogrammed Robot Masters.

Rock and Roll had gone back to helping Doctor Light, while Spider Man had decided to become a school science teacher, under the alias of Peter Parker. And for a few months, things had remained quiet, until Doctor Wily had broken free of prison, again, which Peter had taken in surprisingly good stride. And from there he'd managed to make some new Robot Masters.

So naturally all three had leapt into action, which led them to their current predicament.

"Okay," the visiting Looper started, "what?"

Rock and Roll stared. Or, more accurately, Rock stared. Roll glowered intently.

They had been expecting to find one more of Wily's Robot Masters.

Instead, they found themselves once again facing off against their purported future-selves. Only this time Quint and Waltz had a friend.

He looked vaguely like their current comrade in-arms Spider Man, only in dark purple, bordering on black with white detailing. And he was glaring at them like they were something to be scraped off of his boot.

"Well, you see," Rock started, as they hid from Waltz's erratic firing, "normally these two show up, apparently from the future to cause us trouble. But the newcomer-"

Apparently said newcomer heard that one.

"Swing, you clod," they heard him declare, over the roar of Waltz's blasting. Though they couldn't see it, Waltz was struggling to maintain a perfect poker-face.

"This is one of the first times a guest has gotten an evil version of themselves."

"Okay, I get that," Spider Man said, his voice growing increasingly dark, as he examined his helmet, which had been badly grazed by one of Waltz's opening shots. "I've dealt with future versions of myself before. And evil future versions of myself as well. Not very often, but I have." Peter just sagged, "but Swing?"

For a moment, the Light siblings stared blankly.

"It does fit with the theme naming," Rock pointed out.

"Oh, no, I get that, it's just..." Peter sighed, "Swing? Really? Future-Me couldn't have chosen something more impressive? Anything?"

"If you like," Roll said, "you can take it up with Doctor Wily, later."

"Not gonna be a later for you!" Waltz sang. "Not when w- glumph!"

Roll stared at Peter, Web Shooter armed. A short distance away Waltz swore as she tried to get the substance covering her mouth off, to no success. After a few seconds Roll realised her mouth was hanging open.

"How much of that fluid do you have left?" she asked. Peter glanced at the glowing blue panel, and winced.

"I get the feeling it's not going to be enough."

"No," Roll sighed wearily, "you'd probably need several gallons for her mouth alone."

"Figures," Peter groaned. "Never enough web-fluid when I actually need it."

He looked out again, then to Rock and Roll.

"Plan?" he asked hopefully.

"We each take our doppelgangers," Rock said. Peter looked over towards the suspiciously Venom-like robot still glowering in his direction, then back to Rock and Roll.

"Alone?"

Roll hefted her Mega Buster, her face the picture of composure. "Alone."

"Right." Peter nodded. "Okay. I can do this."

"You never fought yourself?" Roll asked. Peter tilted his head.

"Depends on how you define 'yourself'," he murmured, before smiling. "Don't you just hate time travel?"

The sound of two Mega Busters powering up was Rock and Roll's only response.

As the Lights moved in toward their own counterpart, Peter made his way towards his glowering counterpart. There was something about the way he was glowering that Peter didn't like, something that seemed unnervingly familiar, something about the eyes of that face-concealing helmet.

"So, what's with the black?" he asked, as he aimed a kick for his copy's head. "Don't tell me I've started writing bad poetry again."

His counterpart just dodged, with the same lightning fast reflexes Peter had, and while doing that began aiming a punch. Peter quickly tried deflecting it. He ignored the pain, as his counterpart hit with a lot more strength than Peter ever did, even in his current mechanical form.

"Always making jokes," his counterpart sneered. "Always out of fear, Parker. But you don't have to fear the–"

"Nuh-uh," Peter said, aiming another kick at his opponent. "Unless you're going to tell me your origin and convenient weaknesses, which I'm guessing isn't fire. Not that we have fire, because the mad Doctor didn't bother buildi–"

He stopped, as something slammed into his chest. Underneath that helmet of his, Peter was sure his counterpart was smirking. Not that he could tell, as he was currently staring at the floor. Shaking his head, Peter tried to get to his feet, and aim his Web Shooter.

Swing's fist grabbed his fist, and squeezed.

"No more jokes, Parker."

Several mechanical wrists bound around him. Through the haze of pain, Peter tried to focus on his enemy's face. In the distance, behind him, he could hear Waltz screaming madly, but no sound of Quint or Rock's fight. As his vision cleared, he noticed the four tendrils his future-self seemed to have suddenly formed, ones he was using to lift himself and Peter up.

"You had already lost before this fight began, Parker. I am you, shorn of all your failures. I am..." there was a pause, as Swing chuckled, "I am your superior."

Peter blinked. Memories came back, from his baseline. Experiences he'd sworn never to experience again. But there was something about the Loops that seemed to enjoy making him live through nightmarish situations over, and over again.

"Oh," he said, his voice eerily calm. "Okay then."

And in the space of a few seconds, he ripped Swing's arm clean off.

"Let's put that to the test, shall we?"

Roll stopped to catch her breath, even if only in a figurative sense. Waltz had been forced to retreat, removed from the battlefield by her brother. Slowly, Roll walked over towards her.

"I'm okay," she said, before he could ask anything. "How's Peter?"

The mixed look of bafflement and amazement took her by surprise. "I..." Rock started, "I think he's doing okay."

Roll turned to look, as a battered and scratched Peter made his way over to them, carrying someone's arm.

"Souvenir," he said, absent his normal cheerfulness.

"Are you alright?" both of Doctor Light's children asked. Peter paused, and stared at the arm. He looked around at the remains of the massive laboratory.

"Let's... just go." And with that, Spider Man walked past the two. Rock looked towards Roll, and vice versa. Silently, they followed afterward.

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15. Dafuq?

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" the newly elected chancellor laughed in a manner that would set mental alarms ringing in anyone with a lick of sense. "I thank you all for recognizing my genius and electing me supreme chancellor of the Galactic Republic! My first order of business will be to do away with the backwards and often ineffective ways of the Jedi Order and bring to the republic new and improved defenders! In the form of my patented Jedi Droid Masters! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Why did you two not stop this?" Ahsoka asked tiredly as she began mentally formulating possible methods of evacuating the galaxy. From the looks of it, Anakin was mentally formulating how many bars he'd need to hit.

"Because unlike his usual attempts, it was totally and completely legal," the very human-like droid constructed by Jedi Master Thomas Light shrugged.

"Yeah, not even a Sith plot like Palpatine's," his droid 'twin sister' added, gesturing to the silently fuming senator of Naboo and secret Sith Lord.

Chancellor Wily kept laughing like the madman he was as he began describing his plan for defense using his own creations, introducing the eight prototypes for the senate's approval. From the looks of things, even though many senators were at least a little disturbed by how manic their new chancellor was, the proposition was going to pass by a wide margin.

15.10

He stood in the lobby of the small out of the way theater, or rather a small cultural center with an even smaller theater inside, built on the edge of a lake and in the middle of a residential neighborhood, and

waited for the play to begin. Well... not quite a play. It was called a script reading, presented in 'Dynamic RadioVizion!' according to the ad he'd read. Well, it had sounded interesting and he really had nothing else planned for the evening, so he figured why not?

Blinking out of his thoughts as another man approached him, he straightened up and focused his attention.

"I must say, about the last thing I expected to see was a green biker dude when I came here tonight," the man addressed him with a mildly incredulous grin. "You here for the show?"

"I am. Name's Joe."

"Jonathan Archer," the man greeted, holding his hand out for Joe to shake. "You got a last name? Or a face under that helmet?"

"I'm just Joe. And I like my helmet where it is." Mostly because there really wasn't a face under it to speak of. He was trying to go incognito, but there was only so much you could do by disabling the glow on an optic, putting on a leather jacket, and hoping no one looked too closely.

"Fair enough," the man allowed, and something about his manner and face struck the robot as familiar.

"Are you Awake?" he asked, using the standard code phrase to check for a looper.

"I know I didn't get as much sleep last night as I wanted," the man shook his head, "but do I really look that tired? You're the third person today to ask me that..."

"Sorry," Joe apologized. The reply meant one of a few things: 1a) The man wasn't a looper. 1b) The man was a looper, but wasn't 'Awake'. 2) The man was a looper and Awake and didn't care to make that fact known. In case of the latter, Joe figured he should respect the man's privacy.

"No worries," the man waved the apology off easily. "Still, looks like it might be an interesting show tonight."

"It does at that."

15.0) Mega Mon. Later in the Loop a certain genetically engineered Pokémon Awoke and had to be stopped from lobotomizing Giovanni.

15. Sneak) Consider this a sneak preview of Mega Mon X.

OathToOblivion: First part is already out in the Pokémon Compilation! /ShamelessPlug

Oh! And welcome to the Loops, Axl!

15.1) Bleach Blues.

15.2) According to Bigou, this is based on a French show called 'C'est Pas Sorcier', literally 'It's Not Witchcraft', but essentially French slang meaning something isn't hard to understand. The show ran from November 5, 1994 until February 1, 2014. The name changes are poking fun at an old thing (up until the mid 2000s apparently) regarding French translations getting… weird with characters' names.

15.3) Tagline by Zap Rowsdower: It's impossible for Spiral Power to take out Uzumaki? No problem, he went beyond the impossible and beat it with the power of Rock and Roll!

15.4) Don't remind Spidey about Superior Spider-Man. Or Venom.

15.?) *Blinks* What the…?

(Would you believe I didn't even notice adding this to the compilation until someone pointed it out to me?)

15.5) An Unawake, female Zero acting cutesy and moe. X is Awake however to record the whole thing and the looping Zero will soon

wish he wasn't.

15.6) Blues replacing Eddie Valiant in *Who Censored Roger Rabbit* , the book the movie was based on (and is *wildly* different in many ways).

15.7) He was the victim of a wheelie bad joke.

15.8) What just happened? NANOMACHI–*BLAM*

15.8 & ½) My Looping Zombie Apocalypse Team:

Leader: Splinter (TMNT)

Brains: Atomic Robo (Atomic Robo)

Brawler: Johnny Bravo (Johnny Bravo)

Speedster: Silver the Hedgehog (Sonic the Hedgehog)

Weapons Expert: Quint (Mega Man)

Healer: Hotaru Tomoe/Sailor Saturn (Sailor Moon)

Mascot: Carl the Jeep (Eureka: Christmas Special)

Idiot: Inspector Gadget (Inspector Gadget)

Jerk: Vaati (Legend of Zelda)

15.9) Duel Masters.

15. Dafuq?) And he's not even the strangest individual to be elected to that position either.

15.10) Because we haven't seen much of Joe lately, here he is just chilling out and seeing a show. And making a friend. Bonus points if you recognize the friend.

Battle in the Network: With Soul - Part1

Battle in the Network: With Soul - Part 1

"You all right, Hub?" Lan asked as his brother and NetNavi stretched in his PET.

"Yeah, Lan," Hub replied as he worked a digital kink out of his digital back. "I just think I'm still sore after that whole thing with the last tournament. I mean, Cache did kind of hit me pretty hard..."

Despite the N1 being a WWW plot, people had really liked it and there had been attempts to organize another such event. One of which Lan and Hub had taken part in alongside several friends, rivals, and a few new faces as well.

"I'm just glad it wasn't worse," Lan sympathized. "Still, Cache in the BattleChipGP and Protoman with a 'Muramasa Style'... I certainly don't remember *that* happening before..."

"Hey, at least we got a new style change out of it," Hub replied, referring to the completely unexpected WoodTurbo Style that had shown up at the last moment. "Even if dad made us promise to stop using them unless absolutely necessary."

"Heh..." Lan chuckled. "You should have seen Kai's face when that happened. I think he and Turboman just about exploded from excitement. Anyway, we gotta get down and have breakfast so we can go shopping with dad!"

Lan took the stairs two at a time, but halted as he heard voices from the kitchen.

"Haruka dear, you can't send multiple chips unless they're all the same type or share the same code..." the voice of the two's father was heard. "Don't you remember?"

"Maybe I just like having you remind me, Yuichiro," their mom replied teasingly. "Now, let's get this stove fixed so I can make breakfast."

"I guess it's a good thing we remembered to get that RecoveryPatch yesterday, right?" Hub smiled.

"Yeah, but let's wait a bit before going in," Lan agreed. "It sounds like they're having a 'mom and dad' moment."

"More like they're having a 'you might be getting a new baby brother or sister in several months' moment," Apollo grinned.

"Apollo..." Hephaestus trailed off as he spotted what the sun god was doing and blinked, trying to process the sight. "Where in the world did you get the gutter from and why are you soaking your head in it?" (1)

Lan and his father walked out of Jomon Electric holding bags and smiling broadly.

"They certainly have a lot of cool stuff, don't they?" Lan's dad said as the two exited the store.

"They sure do!"

"Thanks for reminding me to pick up the light bulbs too, Lan."

"No problem!"

"Hey, Lan!" Hub piped up. "Isn't that Yai and Mayl over there?"

"It is!" Lan smile grew as he darted towards the girls and the stereo display they were standing in front of, his father following at a more sedate pace. "Mayl! Yai!"

"Hey, Lan!" Mayl smiled brightly. "Are you and your dad out shopping too? Hi, Mr. Hikari!"

"Hello to you too, Mayl, Yai," Dr. Hikari smiled pleasantly. "Nice day, isn't it?"

"Yep!" Yai and Mayl replied together.

"Say," Lan gestured to the store display Yai and Mayl had been eyeing, "is this the same stereo display that was having that promotion where you could win free earphones by NetBattling?"

"Yeah!" Mayl seemed surprised Lan knew that. "Unfortunately it seems the navi's on break for a bit so they're not offering the promotion right this moment."

"That's too bad," Lan fingered the earphones around his neck that he'd won the other day, "they're pretty awesome."

"I guess Roll and I will have to come back later then and try to win some! She's in there with Glide right now. Why don't you jack Megaman in so he can say hi?"

"You mind, Dad?" Lan turned to his father just as the man's PET rang urgently.

"Not at all, Lan," Dr. Hikari said absently as he got his PET out and began reading whatever urgent message had been sent to him. Lan thought about trying to sneak a peek since his dad had only recently started using a PET again (which was weird since most of his job revolved around PETs and NetNavis) so he could see the navi, but couldn't figure out how to do so without being blatantly obvious.

"Ooo..." Apollo did his best 'mysterious' voice as Lan gave up and jacked Hub into the stereo. "Who could the mystery navi of the great Dr. Hikari be? As if we didn't know already." (2)

"Hush, you," Hephaestus gestured for silence.

Hub watched the seemingly peaceful figure of Shademan. exe out of the corner of his eye as he approached Roll. exe and Glide. exe. The navi might be a serious player in Nebula, but... there wasn't a way to out him at the moment without sounding completely crazy. He and Lan should know since trying to figure that out had been one of Lan's favorite distractions from homework lately.

"Hey, Megaman!" Roll. exe greeted warmly. "Haven't seen you much lately! How have things been?"

"Pretty good, Roll," Hub smiled back. "Nice to see you too, Glide."

"A pleasure as always," the brown navi returned politely. "I understand you've taken part in the store's promotion recently?"

"Yeah, Lan and I came out here the other day to look around. The store navi's not that bad actually."

"But no match for the great Megaman, five-time savior of the world!" Apollo declared dramatically.

"Will you get *off my desk* ?!" Hephaestus yelled.

"Lan, Hub?" Dr. Hikari said as Lan finished jacking Hub out. "I'm afraid I've been called into work on an extremely urgent matter. I was hoping to spend the whole day with you and now... Now I have to go to Netopia immediately to deal with this issue."

"You're going overseas?" Yai looked interested. "How cool! But I suppose it's no surprise seeing as you *are* one of Electopia's top scientists."

"Perhaps," Dr. Hikari allowed before turning to Lan again. "I'm not sure how long it will be before I can return, so be sure to look after the house and your mom while I'm away. I'm sorry I couldn't spend more time with you."

"It's fine, dad," Lan replied easily. "Go, save the world. Maybe this time I won't need to help bail you out."

"Ha ha!" Lan's father laughed. "Well, if I get in a jam I'll know exactly who to call, won't I?"

"Yeah!"

"Saving the world: Now a family business! Act now and get a rag-tag group of misfits with every hero!"

Hephaestus blinked owlishly at the flyers Apollo was waving in his direction. "Where do you *get* these things?"

"Ah, brother," the sun god tsked and waved his finger, "the great Apollo is prepared for everything!"

Lan watched as the official address the crowd using the full volume of probably the biggest loudspeaker ever built (even though the crowd was close enough they probably could have heard him without it), quietly trading commentary with Hub as he spoke.

"I HAVE COME TODAY FROM THE DENCITY NETBATTLE COMMITTEE!"

"Gee, I wonder if this is about NetBattling?"

"You know, I think it might be."

"–TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF NETCRIME, THE GOVERNMENT HAS BANNED NETBATTLES BY ORDINARY CITIZENS."

"Really?"

"First I've heard of it." (3)

"MY FRIENDS, THIS BAN HAS NOW BEEN LIFTED!"

"How generous. The ban that never existed has been lifted. We can go on NetBattling friends and rivals like always."

"Yippee. Hooray."

"–IMPROVE THE NETBATTLE SKILLS OF DENCITY CITIZENS BY HOLDING A GRAND NETBATTLE TOURNAMENT!"

"Totally not another attempt to restart the N1!"

"Honest!"

"A COMPETITION TO FIND THE CITY'S BEST NETBATTLER: THE CITY BATTLE TOURNAMENT!"

"Gee... how original..." Lan deadpanned as the crowd began cheering.

"THIS PRELIMINARIES FOR THIS CITY BATTLE TOURNAMENT WILL COMMENCE TOMORROW RIGHT HERE AT 10 AM!"

"Cutting it a little close, are you?" Hub added as the crowd's reaction completely flipped at this addition. The official began stammering apologies as he retreated, tossing back that those who passed the prelims would be on TV as he fled.

A rather large portion of the crowd changed attitude at this, deciding to forego their plans for the opportunity to be on television.

"We're still gonna join, right?" Hub asked as the crowd began to disperse.

"Of course!" Lan sounded like the very idea that they wouldn't was unthinkable. "But first, let's make sure Shademan won't be able to use this thing to its full potential. Just in case we can't beat him to where we're meeting our friends..."

Lan walked over to the giant speaker and turned the volume knob all the way down.

"Ah, Lan, you are a hero after the great Apollo's own heart..."

"His grades would appear to back that up."

"Harsh, brother, harsh..."

As it turned out, they hadn't quite made it in time to stop Shademan. exe's attack. While they'd been catching the announcement, the vampiric darkloid had been snacking on the energy of every navi in the stereo display. And then he'd jacked out rather than fight them in search of a female navi for 'dessert'.

Racing him to the meeting area yielded, just as they expected, a defeated Gutsman. exe and Glide. exe, as well as a kidnapped Roll. exe.

Of course, since Lan already had the headphone prize from the promotion, getting to the speaker's system to jack in directly (because the system designer hadn't connected the part of the system that led to the net with the rest of it for some weird reason, meaning only navis that could fly were able to bridge the gap) was little issue. As was making their way to where Shademan. exe was holding Roll. exe captive.

"Hold it right there! Let her go!"

"Mega!" Roll. exe yelled in relief.

"You just can't let me enjoy my dessert in peace, can you?" Shademan. exe screeched at them.

He tried to say more, but Hub cut him off with a couple of shots from his MegaBuster.

"So, that's how you wish it to be?" the vampiric navi hissed, unhurt. "Blast forth, my beam! WHEEEEEE!"

The cyberspeakers next to him produced a rather lackluster whisper.

"What?" the bat-like navi blinked in astonishment.

"Maybe next time you should check the volume!" Hub retorted as he charged into battle.

"You're far too puny to defeat me!" Shademan. exe laughed as the shots did little more than force him into a shadowy state that reformed a short distance away. "I'll delete you and then savor that lady navi's energy!"

"In your dreams, creep!" Roll yelled as she unleashed an arrow at the vampire, knocking something loose from him and forcing him to turn to shadows again and reform. It went like that for several seconds, the two heroic navis (even if one had been thrust into a damsel in distress role) blasting Shademan. exe to no avail, but the shadowy vampire not getting in any attacks of his own.

"What... What has happened to my power?" Shademan. exe sounded confused.

"Lan, it's like shadow boxing in here!" Hub yelled to his brother. "He's not really doing anything to us, but we're not hurting him either!"

"There you are!" a new voice cut in. "The one who attacked all those navis!"

"Protoman!" Hub yelled as the crimson-armored sword wielding navi appeared, causing Shademan. exe to hiss.

"Chaud! About time you showed up!" Lan yelled in the real world.

"Yes," Chaud hesitated at the fact Lan was expecting him for a moment, "well, we were only recently alerted to the attacks. In any case, we'll take it from here. Protoman, apprehend the criminal!"

"Yes, sir," Protoman. exe replied as he readied himself.

"All these interruptions to my dessert..." the vampire navi hissed. "And the legendary officials as well? I think I've had enough for today. Wheeee!"

"Not so fast!" Protoman moved to cut the vampiric navi down, only for Shademan. exe to jack out of the system at the last moment. "Darn!"

"After him, Protoman!"

"Right away, sir!" Protoman. exe intoned before jacking out himself.

"Oh, Mega!" Roll. exe launched herself into a flying hug the moment Protoman. exe was gone. "I knew you'd come to save me! Oh, and you too, Lan!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know when I'm a third wheel," Lan play-huffed.

"Oh, right!" Roll. exe released Hub as quickly as she'd grabbed him. "Shademan dropped something! What do you think it is?"

Hub looked over at the darkly glowing piece of data that Shademan. exe had dropped in their fight and waved Roll. exe back from it before picking it up himself.

"I don't know," he lied. He had a darn good idea what this was and what it might do to him. But then he had memories of handling it before, and he was sure he could do it again. "It looks like a BattleChip of some sort. Maybe Higsby will know more..."

"The great Higsby and his awesome hair know all!" Apollo declared.

Hephaestus sighed at the sun god's antics before something about Apollo's appearance registered and he did a double-take. "Did you

really just style your hair to look like that of a mortal from my Loop?" (4)

"...It's true! Lan is right! I should collect chips by busting viruses... huh. I'll be good now, I promise. Trade chips sometime?"

"Sure! Why not? But...You do have to pay for your crimes. So... You better do something to help everyone out, okay?"

Lan had to admit that Higsby and Numberman. exe had both come a long way from brainwashing schoolkids for the WWW and had become indispensable (if still a bit mercenary) sources of support and advice as well as good friends. But the fact remained that they had been part of a dangerous cyber-syndicate and were far more familiar with the seedy underbelly of the world than many criminals.

"You wanna get inside the undernet, huh? ... OK, huh! Thanks to you, I got out of the WWW, huh! To thank you, I'll get you into the undernet, huh!"

As far as the two were concerned, a grade-schooler and his navi wanting into the undernet wasn't even a cause for alarm. Just a favor. A big favor, but still a favor.

"Oh no! T-This chip...!"

So when Higsby looked at something like it was demon spawn, you knew it was a whole new level of *bad* .

"Lan..." Higsby was shaking like he expected the DarkChip to leap up and start eating people. Which, come to think of it, might be less scary than what the thing actually *did* do. "Where did you get this chip?!"

"Er..." Lan hesitated. He didn't remember Higsby being quite this intense. "A strange vampire navi named Shademan..."

"Nevermind!" Higsby interrupted. "Lan, you have to get rid of that chip! Immediately! That... That's a DarkChip... It... It draws those who use it deep into Murkland... It possesses great power, true, but using it is tantamount to a deal with the devil! A deal that could cost your very soul!"

Lan gulped. Definitely more intense than he'd been expecting.

"You... you didn't... *use* it... did you? But... no... you got the data in the cyberworld... didn't you?"

Hesitantly, Lan nodded.

"Then... it's already infected Megaman..." Higsby moaned.

"Eh-heh..." Hub tried to lighten the mood unsuccessfully. "But, I feel fine!"

"You do now..." Higsby returned ominously. "But the DarkChip will tempt you to use it. Any time you're in need, it will call to you to use its power, but you must never do so! Promise me!"

"We won't let it get to us!" Lan said hastily, knowing full well that he couldn't make that promise in good faith. He'd do his best to never use it, but... He knew there were other ways to harm Shademan.exe, he just didn't know how to invoke them deliberately yet.

"No DarkPower will overcome me as long as I have Lan!" Hub added.

"I hope you're right," Higsby sighed. "So few can resist the pull once they've tasted its power..."

"S'more?"

"Thank you," Hephaestus accepted the treat from Apollo and was about to take a bite when something occurred to him. "...Please tell

me you didn't build a campfire in my office just to roast marshmallows for the spooky plot revelation..."

"As you wish. The great Apollo will not tell you this."

Dr. Yuichiro Hikari sighed as he stood in one of the observation labs at NAXA. He understood that whatever was going on was dire and he probably was one of the most qualified people in the world to help deal with, well, anything. Still, he couldn't help but feel disappointed at not getting to spend time with his family, especially now that he'd heard from his wife that Lan was going to be in a NetBattle tournament... later today.

Dr. Hikari stifled a yawn. He'd done his best to sleep on the plane, but jet lag really was inevitable when you flew halfway around the world.

"65 million years ago..." he heard himself start saying, "the dinosaurs that ruled this planet were wiped out by an extinction event triggered by an asteroid impact." Turning that over in his head, he realized that the head NAXA researcher, a fairly attractive woman but not able to hold a candle to his wife in his humble opinion, had mentioned an asteroid headed towards their planet, calculated to impact directly in a few months time with cataclysmic results. *'Wow... I must be more tired than I thought if I'm responding on autopilot...'*

"Indeed," the woman replied without missing a beat. "However, we are not like the dinosaurs. We have become masters of science!"

"Using technology," a voice rang from the back of the room, around a corner that prevented sight of the speaker, a voice Dr. Hikari thought sounded familiar but that he couldn't quite place in his tired state, "we should be able to prevent the asteroid's impact..."

"Exactly, Dr..." the head of NAXA hesitated a moment, sounding like she wasn't entirely happy that this person was present, "...Regal."

'Wait,' Dr. Hikari's mind jolted to full alertness from the sudden shot of adrenaline the name triggered, *'what?!'*

"Dun-dun-DUN!"

"You've been watching that Order of the Stick branch again, haven't you?"

"What makes you say that, brother?"

"You're wearing a t-shirt featuring their Anchor." (5)

Lan had woken up extra early that day. Heck, he'd had to wake Hub up much to the latter's shock. But it had all been worth it to get a head start on the prelim tasks.

He'd found the Mettaur village in record time, going through the scavenger hunt motions for the benefit of any tournament officials who might be watching. He also just 'happened' to have a pair of goldbugs he'd found the previous afternoon while pursuing his bug collecting hobby (coincidentally begun that same afternoon, but they didn't need to know that). And the quiz from the final task-giver had been easy, as had the trio of virus battles she'd sent at him.

Which left him in a rather interesting position when compared with his memories.

"Welcome to the Den City NetBattle Tournament!" the official greeted him in the contestant's locker room within the DenDome. "You're the first to clear the prelims today, so please have a seat while we wait for the rest of the competitors to arrive."

Lan smiled to himself as he grabbed a folding chair and set himself up in a far corner of the room. "Heh... It'll be neat to see if this changes who we face first in the tournament, won't it?"

"Yeah, Lan," Hub agreed readily. "Maybe we'll face someone other than..."

Lan blinked as his navi/brother trailed off. "What is it, Hub?"

"Lan... I... Who was it we faced first again?"

Lan snorted in laughter. "Did your memory get a bug in it? It was..."

Lan blinked as instead of a single name coming to mind, no less than *eight* hit him at once. The friendly delinquent Tetsu and his HeelNavi, the ghostly Yuko and her NormalNavi Ponta, the elderly Tensuke and Topman. exe, the cheating duo of Terry Jomon and Sparkman. exe, and then there were more familiar names. The 'unlucky' Shuko and her worrywart navi Aquaman. exe, the supposedly reformed Mr. Match and his original navi Fireman. exe (the thought of which had Lan clenching his fists in anger), the staunch allies Higsby and Numberman. exe, and their oldest rivals Dex and Gutsman. exe.

"It was..." Lan clutched his head as scenarios ran through his mind at a feverish pace. He'd only faced three of them over the course of the tournament... But *which* three? And in what order? Would all of them even be competing? He only remembered six of them being in the tournament after all... And not which two had been absent...
"...Hub, I don't think these future memories of ours are as reliable as we thought..."

If anything, it was *worse* than the BattleChipGP... At least that had been pretty fuzzy throughout, but this... This was crystal clear memories going to war with each other over which one was right.

"Ah, the vaunted realm of prophecy. Always reliable, always accurate, save for those times when it is not."

Hephaestus blinked. "...I'm honestly surprised to hear you admit that."

"Brother, none know this truth more than the great Apollo," the god of prophecy nodded in what he probably thought was a wise manner. "How else would the great Apollo be so great at what he does?"

Lan stared in a bit of a stupor as the room filled up. He recalled a tournament of *eight* from before. There were currently *fourteen* and entry hadn't yet been closed.

The first to show up after him had been some shopkeeper he didn't recognize, but the navi Brightman. exe was familiar from the Zero Virus incident. Following him was Mr. Match with Fireman. exe,

"Don't bother calling your navi! He just went boom!"

"You... You're the panel repair man!"

"Hah! That was just a disguise! I work for the WWW, silly kid!"

"I can't believe I trusted you!"

and surprisingly Ms. Madd with Colorman. exe.

"You don't know the trouble I've... Arrghh! This time I'll break all the traffic signals for good! Heh, heh! And I'll get you good, too! That's right! I've been looking at your personal files... Ah, there's nothing sadder than losing the ones we love... And I think you're gonna be real *sad!"*

There were more familiar faces that came in, such as Dex, Higsby, and to his supreme shock Yai (all of whom he'd greeted somewhat mechanically as they came up to him). Plus a few more that he'd met this time around like Tory Froid with Iceman. exe and Ms. Mari's sister Yuri with Needleman. exe; while others were only familiar from his weird unreliable future memories, such as the grinning delinquent Tetsu (registering his HeelNavi as 'Bo' which rather surprised Lan and Hub) (6), the elderly Tensuke, a shifty-looking Terry, the clumsy Shuko who tripped in with a bang that shook the room, and the eerie

girl Yuko who startled the official by appearing out of thin air right next to him.

'What in the world is going on?' he wondered to himself, only to be shaken from his stupor when Hub's insistent hissing got his attention.

"Lan...!"

"What is it, Hub?"

"Kai just walked in..." Hub prompted, getting Lan to look up at the young boy with the white sweatband and the yellow racing suit.

"And...?" Lan blinked.

"And Ms. Madd is here!" Hub hissed.

"So...?" Lan continued blinking, his mind catching up with the situation.

"Heheh! You better listen up, kiddo! I forgot to mention the virus I put in the bus gas program! It makes the gas go backwards and then... It's BOOM time! I should think the virus will activate any time now... You better stop that bus quick, huh? Good luck! Heheh!"

"So Kai was on the bus she hijacked! If he sees her..."

Right... Lan had faith in all of his friends, but there was faith and then there was tempting fate.

"Hey, Kai!" Lan got up and walked over to greet the boy properly, angling himself so Kai would have to face away from where Ms. Madd was standing to talk to him. "What's up? Hub and I haven't seen you since the BattleChipGP!"

"Master Lan!" the boy's face lit up.

"Master Megaman!" the similarly eager voice of Turboman. exe sounded from Kai's PET.

"Hey guys!" Hub greeted warmly. "How've things been?"

"Great!" the racing-themed duo enthused.

"And with that, I can now announce the pairings for the matches!" the voice of the registering official caught everyone's attention. "If I can direct everyone's attention to the board display, here are the pairings for the Den City NetBattle Tournament!"

Lan's eyes weren't on the brackets declaring the first round pairings between the sixteen competitors. No, his confused gaze was on the final entrant.

Mayl Sakurai.

His next-door neighbor since infancy, best friend for as long as he could remember, and potential future girlfriend. (7)

'But... she's supposed to be in the next *tournament... right?'*

"The kid has a point," Apollo mused as he looked over the baseline data.

"Watch and see," Hephaestus said mysteriously. "Let the games begin!"

The match-ups had been decided and as it turned out Lan and Mayl were in completely different blocks. Mayl's block had her facing off against Shuko and Aquaman. exe first, Yai versus Terry, the most-likely-a-ghost Yuko against Ms. Yuri, and Kai facing off against Mr. Match. Lan's block on the other hand had Higsby facing down his former WWW colleague Ms. Madd, Dex squaring off with Tory Froid,

Brightman. exe's operator (for some reason Lan kept missing the guy's name) facing Tensuke, leaving Lan himself to fight Tetsu. (8)

Upon finding out that Tetsu was his first opponent, Lan was determined to avoid those shakedown artists he was reasonably certain were coming, trading friendly banter with Tetsu almost absently as he made his way outside the dome so the officials could get things set up. If he managed to avoid it, he might even be able to warn Yai about Terry and his cheating scam.

Of course, right as he spotted the two shakedown artists headed in his general direction, he got distracted by the sight of Kai accusing Mr. Match of something down by the hotdog stand.

And then he was distracted from that by something running into him.

"Arrrggh! Ouch!" the weedy-looking guy that had collided with Lan moaned dramatically, clutching his arm in apparent pain. "My shoulder! I think it's broken! I can't even hold my fork!"

"Oh no! Little brother!" the larger guy yelled in loudly faked concern. "Your shoulder's been smashed to pieces! You'll never be able to use your right arm ever again!"

Lan mentally went over a rather long list of words he'd never dare say out loud for fear that his mom would wash his mouth out with actual soap.

"His right arm?" Apollo blinked. "The great Apollo sees him holding his left."

"These are hardly the brightest minds of humanity," Hephaestus reminded him as Tetsu decided the best way to break up the scene was by climbing to the roof just so he could jump off of it into the middle of the argument.

'Great, we manage to stop a fight in the real world and start one in the cyber-world,' Hub sighed to himself as he ran for Town Area 3 and the fight between the navis of Tetsu and those two idiots.

"How does he do it?!" he heard a black HeelNavi up ahead exclaim in shock. "He's beaten 80 of my 100 guys and he still won't stop!"

"Keep 'em coming!" Tetsu's HeelNavi, Bo, boasted. "I won't stop until I smash you to smithereens, no matter how many of your flunkies I gotta go through!"

"You shut up!"

"Hub!" Lan yelled suddenly over the PET's connection. "Jack out! There's a cyber-flood coming!"

Hub, along with every other navi in earshot (Bo and the HeelNavi gang included), turned to see a mass of cyber-water coming at them accompanied by what sounded like faint echoing sobs in the distance.

"Ohhhh... Surf!" Hub yelped as he hastily jacked out. (9)

Apollo blinked repeatedly as he watched the unfortunate gang navis (among others) be swept away by the torrent of water. Unharmed, but most certainly humiliated. "The great Apollo does not think that was what was supposed to happen..."

"No, but the way I had to integrate the divergent timelines means that even the plots Lan and Hub aren't directly involved in will still happen. Shuko's navi Aquaman heard her and her brothers talking about replacing their washing machine and, since they talked about it making 'whoosh' sounds, he thought they meant him and his particular manner of speaking. See there? The Mayl girl is handling it right now."

Tetsu and Bo were certainly tougher than the average navi, but for Lan and Hub not particularly challenging. However, he'd only been the second match of the first round, so there were still plenty to go before they could set up for the second round.

Lan found his way to a seat to watch his friends compete. Dex and Gutsman. exe made fairly short work of Tory and Iceman. exe (apparently on loan from his father) before joining him. Higsby and Numberman. exe similarly took out Ms. Madd before leaving.

Then the matches for Mayl's block were up. Yai and Glide. exe struggled to put up a good fight against Terry and Sparkman. exe, their normal arsenal of expensive and rare chips replaced by a common starter folder and Lan smacked himself for forgetting about that in the confusion of the stuff with Tetsu and the two goons. Mayl's match with Shuko was next and Lan found himself rather impressed with how Roll. exe and Aquaman. exe fought. But unfortunately for Shuko, Roll. exe proved the superior battler. Still, the girl Lan's jumbled memories painted as consistently depressed looked pretty happy with things as she skipped down the steps... only to trip and land with a *boom* that echoed across the dome.

Ms. Yuri and Needleman. exe (Lan was a little confused at the pairing, had that really been her navi originally?) put up a good fight, but the seemingly young girl Yuko and her navi Ponta (who was one of the generic yellow female FaceNavis (10) rather than the standard green NormalNavi that Lan and Hub recalled) emerged victorious. And then it was time for the last match of the round: Kai and Turboman. exe against Mr. Match and Fireman. exe.

Which was about when things went south. With Mr. Match declaring his intent to bomb the place, backing out when the hot dog vendor lady began cheering for him, and Match's underlings loudly declaring that they were going ahead with the plan anyway regardless of what Match himself thought.

"Kai," Lan yelled into his PET's phone app, "if those guys have turned on Mr. Match, then one of the detonators is probably in the

battle machine! Don't worry about the others, we've got them!"

"Darn straight we do!" Dex yelled back as he, Mayl, Yai, and Tory joined Lan in rushing out to look for the bombs.

"Yeehaw!" Gutsman. exe added.

"Okay, Lan, where do we start looking?" Mayl got right to business.

Lan took a deep breath to steady himself and began directing his friends to where he recalled the bombs being hidden. He might not be completely certain they'd be there, but it was still a place to start.

"Ah, Kai, the great Apollo sees that you are a fine student of the mighty Lan!" the sun god beamed as the boy insisted on finishing the match before his opponent turned himself in to the authorities.

"He does seem to have learned the heart of the hero," Hephaestus allowed as the navi of flame and the navi of racing clashed in battle.

"Way to go, Kai and Turboman!" Lan and his friends cheered as they walked outside the DenDome during the interval between the first round and the second, meant to give the competitors a chance to rest before the next fight.

Kai blushed at the praise. Even Turboman. exe seemed embarrassingly flattered.

"Yeah, you guys aren't bad," Yai admitted before turning to Mayl and started dragging her off, "but still you need to watch out for Terry! That guy..."

"Well, Yai seems determined to save Mayl from her upcoming opponent," Hub mused.

"Yeah, but who's gonna save her from Yai?"

"Heh!" Dex chuckled. "Anyway, I gotta go check on Higsby! Something funny's up with him. See you guys later!"

Lan and Kai watched Dex tear off towards the metro before moving to head in that direction, only to find something in their path. Or, rather, in Kai's path.

"GAH!" Kai yelped as he registered the small form of Yuko in front of him.

"Hi there!" Yuko smiled prettily. "I'm so glad you're my opponent! I always wanted to fight a strong, handsome navi like Turboman!"

Kai blinked in surprise. Lan wasn't that far behind him.

"S-s-strong?" Turboman. exe sputtered. "H-h-h-handsome? M-me?"

Lan chuckled at the scenario as he began to recover and wandered away. He was sure Kai could take care of himself.

"Here I go, Kosuke!" an elderly voice cut into his thoughts, reminding him of his own opponent for the upcoming match as he looked over to see the elderly man he knew as Tensuke proudly showing off a high tech top to a young boy.

"Hey, Lan," Hub spoke up as his brother began to walk down to the two, "you think Topman's really as senile as those memories show?"

"Only one way to find out," Lan answered.

"It's spinning, it's spinning," Apollo narrated. "Kosuke's unimpressed. It's spinning, Kosuke's leaving, it's... sparking and hopping around like a mexican jumping bean... Clearly this is a job for the mighty Lan and Megaman! Those viruses are no match for the saviors of the world! Watch in awe, old man, as your problems disappear before their awesome migh–You ingrate! You wouldn't know talent if it walked up and kicked your aging carcass! What do you mean your

navi could have handled it!? Your senile buggy piece of junk can't even remember what he's doing!"

"You know, I kinda feel sorry for Tensuke," Lan said as he stepped off the Metroline and headed towards the exit. "I mean, sure he's stubborn and not very friendly, but he made his own navi, possibly from scratch, just so he could have something to relate with his grandson about."

"You said it, Lan," Hub agreed. "Plus the fact that he not only got through the prelims with such a buggy navi, but beat Brightman too is really impressive. It'd be a shame if we didn't get to face Topman at his bes–"

"Hey, Lan!" a shout from Dex interrupted their thoughts as they stepped out of the station. The larger boy came running up waving a fistful of flyers. "You gotta help Higsby out! Here, take a flyer!"

"Um... Dex?" Lan stepped back from the other, having a pretty good idea what was going on from his weird jumbled future memories. "I already shop at Higsby's all the time. If you want to help him out, you gotta get *new* customers."

"Oh... right," Dex looked suitably embarrassed.

"Look, just hand some out around town, maybe a few on the net, and I'm sure the problem will be fine. After all, no one knows chips like Higsby!"

"Darn straight!" Dex and Gutsman yelled together.

"Yeehaw!" Gutsman added as Dex blinked and looked at something behind Lan.

"Hey, Kai, what's wrong?" the larger boy's question prompted Lan to turn around to see a pale and somewhat shell-shocked looking Kai.

Lan's biggest fan in the world slowly turned to look at them and considered the question for a moment before shaking his head. "You would *never* believe me..."

With that, Kai continued past the two and into the Metroline.

"Wow, wonder what that's about?" Dex blinked. "But it can wait! I gotta help Higsby so I can have my match!"

Lan chuckled as Dex tore off down the street, looking for hapless pedestrians to hand out flyers to. A moment later his PET beeped.

"Hey, Lan, you've got mail!" Hub sounded a bit surprised. "It's from Mayl, she says 'Ooooo! You would not *believe* what that jerk Terry did! He tried to get me with some free PET maintenance scam and when I told him I didn't need or want it, he just grabbed my PET and locked my folder out! And then he took off running before I could twist his ear and make him unlock it again! Forget the NetBattle, I've got half a mind to punch him so hard he'll be picking his teeth off the ground in Netopia! Sorry about that... I just needed to vent a bit... I don't know what I'm going to do about my match though...' Jeez, sounds like Terry better watch his back..."

"Yeah," Lan said as he looked over at the park area and the gathering of elderly NetBattlers he needed to speak with. He could take a moment to throw Mayl a hint. "Send a reply: 'If you want, I'd be happy to hold him down for you and I'm sure I could talk Dex into helping. But seriously, try Jomon over in ElecTown. I hear there's an old guy who hangs out there all the time that knows a lot about these things.' End message and send."

"Done, Lan!"

"Good," Lan nodded as he turned back to the group of elderly NetBattlers and began heading in their direction. "Now let's see about helping Tensuke fix Topman."

"Please let the great Apollo know when it's safe to look again."

Hephaestus blinked at the odd request and turned to see that Apollo had forcefully shut his eyes and covered his face with his hands. He then looked back at the display where Lan was rather amiably talking with the elderly NetBattler's club, convincing them to allow him to take a test to gain their assistance.

"What in Yggdrasil are you expecting to happen?" Hephaestus asked in confusion.

"The *pinching* , man! Lan's just a adorable kid facing down little old ladies! There's no way he's getting out of there with his cheeks intact!" (11)

Hub breathed a sigh of relief as he headed to the area where the elderly NetBattler's club's chief's (12) navi was waiting. The riddles he'd been presented with during this little game of hide and seek had been brain twisters for sure, made all the more difficult since his memories and Lan's didn't seem to contain the correct answers.

"The more you take, the more you leave behind. What are they?" (13a)

"Lighter than what I'm made of, more of me is hidden than is seen. What am I?" (13b)

"Lovely and round, I shine with pale light, grown in the darkness, a lady's delight. What am I?" (13c)

"What is put on a table, cut, and never eaten?" (13d)

"What goes around the house, and in the house, but never touches the house?" (13e)

"Brothers and sisters, I have none. But that man's father is my father's son. Who is it?" (13f)

"I build up castles. I tear down mountains. I make some men blind. I help others to see. What am I?" (13g)

"What goes up the chimney down, but can't go down the chimney up? (13h)

"I go around in circles, but always straight ahead. Never complain no matter where I am led. What am I?" (13i)

"I am only useful when I am full. Yet I am always full of holes. What am I?" (13j)

Fortunately, the older navis seemed perfectly willing to give him the secrets they held in exchange for a good shoulder rub when he answered wrong. He'd gotten their navi-making secrets and membership, allowing him into the club's homepage where the chief's navi was waiting.

'And... is that him?' Hub blinked as he spotted yet another older navi. Except... this one didn't quite mesh with his memories. Most of the navi's form was pretty close to the NormalNavi he'd clearly been modified from, and the deviations could easily be accounted for by personal style and operator preferences. But on his back...

On his back was a giant diamond-shaped sail. Or rather... a kite.

"So..." the elder navi began when he caught sight of Hub, "I hear you've come on behalf of Tensuke. I want you to know I respect that about you, but I'm afraid I can't help you." The navi's arm transformed into a cannon before he spoke again. "No offense, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave now."

Hub yelped as he wasn't even given the chance to comply before the navi fired and called Lan for some battle chips, getting a trio of AirShots in short order. Which was good, since he didn't want to hurt this navi (despite the sentiment not appearing to be mutual). Unfortunately, when he fired them, the wind power was absorbed by the kite-shaped sail on the navi's back, lifting him into the air.

"Imbecile! I am Kiteman!" the elder navi yelled as one arm formed into a cybersword and he angled for a steep and fast dive at Hub. "Wind attacks only make me stronger!"

Hub dove under the dive as Lan sent him a Ball chip which he twisted and threw straight into the navi's back.

"ARGH!" Kiteman. exe yelled as he tumbled hard. When he began to get to his feet a moment later, he was clutching his back.

"Look, isn't this going a little far?" Hub tried to defuse further hostilities.

"Maybe," Kiteman. exe grunted, "but my NetOp, the Chief, won't help Tensuke. I don't expect you to understand, but those two have been at odds longer than I've existed. Always fighting about work or something. Yeah, maybe they got along at some point, but I've certainly never seen it."

"Well, maybe," Hub allowed, "but still..."

Kiteman. exe sighed and stretched, cracking his digital back loudly. "Okay, I can tell by your expression that even if Tensuke doesn't mean business you sure do. Hold on a moment."

Hub watched in something between confusion and amazement as Kiteman. exe put a call in to Topman. exe and insisted he get Tensuke down to the ElecTown square immediately in the way only an irascible old man could.

Hephaestus waited for Apollo to make some random comment or action as Tensuke and the Chief, the old top-maker and the old kite-maker, argued with each other in front of a bewildered Lan, such as asking if the two were brothers or merely cantankerous old friends. And waited. And waited.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" he finally asked.

"Hmm?" Apollo jolted out of whatever thought he was lost in as the Chief threw the 'How to Make Navis' guide at Tensuke. "Oh, I was just thinking about the last time I spoke with Artemis. I wonder how she's doing?"

"Still says she'll cut them off if she sees you any time in the next century after whatever you did in front of her friends."

"Ah, perfectly fine then. That's good to hear."

Hephaestus rolled his eyes. Apollo and Artemis had, by mortal standards, the most normal sibling relationship in the Olympian pantheon (and perhaps the whole of the divine realm). Despite that, they still managed to have one of the strangest as well.

The match order had been flipped for the second round, meaning that Lan went last.

Kai's match with Yuko had ended in stunned silence as the defeated girl turned into bright golden light and vanished, causing a deluge of rumors to sweep the stadium (Lan was personally fond of the one that she'd secretly been an alien sent to test Earth's defenders for an invasion).

After that, the way Mayl and Roll. exe with their restored chip folder pretty much curbstomped Terry and Sparkman. exe had been rather anticlimactic. Though there was more buzz when the old man from Jomon, the owner of the store and Terry's grandfather, rather publicly disowned the boy for his cheating.

Dex's battle against Higsby had come close, and Lan's enjoyment of the match had been somewhat ruined by a late-arriving Chisao cheering at the top of his lungs right in Lan's ear, but Dex and Gutsman. exe had emerged triumphant in the end.

Which left Lan where he was facing off against Tensuke.

"Get ready, you whippersnapper!" Tensuke glared at Lan (14). "My navi's not just fixed, he's better than ever!"

"I hope so!" Lan returned as the two jacked their navis in.

"So you're the young punk I'm facing," Topman. exe fingered his pipe and tapped his cane. "You don't look like much."

"I'm more than meets the eye, old navi!" Hub grinned as Lan opened by sending him a couple of HeatShots.

"You got spunk, I'll give you that," Topman. exe snorted in derision as he simply leaned out of the way of the blasts and began revving a pair of tops that began weaving erratically towards Hub along the ground.

"I've got more than–whoa!" Hub yelped as he sidestepped the tops only to notice that Topman. exe himself had turned into a giant top and launched himself into the air right before he would have landed on Hub. Just in time to dive out of the way, but forcing him to abort the bomb attack he'd been readying. "Okay, you're pretty good..."

"Back at ya, whippersnapper," Topman. exe smirked.

Hub felt his arm form into a cybersword as a new chip came in and darted forward, only to watch as Topman. exe's cane shifted into one as well and the two blades locked together.

"Not bad," Topman. exe's baggy eyes gleamed with intensity as he stared into Hub's. "But not good enough."

Hub was caught off guard as the battletop his opponent had been revving while they locked blades slammed into him, knocking him back and circling around to hit him again.

"Ow..." Hub winced as he got to his feet and felt the chip data Lan sent begin to shift. "Okay, maybe it's time to take this up a level! Program Advance! Giga Cannon 1!"

Topman. exe sidestepped the powerful blast and sent more tops Hub's way, joining the advancing weapons in his own top form. Hub dodged as best he could and waited for his opponent to revert to normal so he could make his move.

"Program Advance!"

"You just don't learn," Topman. exe grunted as he sidestepped the oncoming shot again, "d–"

"LifeSword!"

"Whoops! Wrong counter maneuver, old man!" Apollo jeered.

"Perhaps, but he's proven himself," Hephaestus noted as he watched the man's grandson observe the battle's finish with an awed expression on his face.

"The great Apollo is rather surprised you care what happens to what is ultimately a mortal of little consequence."

"My loopers care," Hephaestus smiled, "and that is enough for me. Besides, the man is a fellow craftsman."

"The great Apollo did not express disapproval."

"Hey there, Lan," Dex walked up, grinning. "Looks like we're facing each other in the semi-finals!"

"Yeah, looks like!" Lan agreed, still thinking that the extra round over what he recalled was kind of weird. Especially with the way Mayl was in the tournament.

"Sorry it has to be this way," Dex continued cockily, "but Gutsman and I won't be losing this time! There's no way!"

Lan was about to retort when another voice cut in.

"Big brudder!" the voice of Dex's younger brother yelled as he ran up.

"Hey, Chisao! You enjoying the tournament?" Lan greeted with a slightly forced grin. Dex's younger brother was a cute kid, but wow could he be annoying at times.

Chisao studiously ignored him.

"Chisao!" Dex scolded. "It's rude not to say hi to people!"

"Why should I do that?" Chisao blinked with oblivious innocence. "He is big brudder's enemy! I don't talk to da enemy!"

"Yep, that's Chisao for you, always so feisty!" Hub chuckled as Lan groaned.

"Don't get all chummy wid me!" Chisao pointed at Lan's PET in a pose he'd probably seen on TV. "Big brudder's gonna beat your pants off! Big brudder's the best NetBattler there is!"

"Chisao!" Dex blushed in embarrassment. "Stop being so rude!"

Chisao paused and turned a look of hurt shock at Dex before sniffing. "Big brudder's mad at me..." Chisao sniffed a few more times, his eyes tearing up before he turned and ran from the room bawling.

"Chisao!" Dex took off after his brother in alarm. "Sorry about this, Lan!" he called back as he left the room.

"Wow..." Hub blinked. "That... that could have gone better..."

"Yeah," Lan sighed. "I'd hoped that trying to be nicer to him would head this off, but it seems not..."

Lan stood there for a few minutes, listening to Mayl and Kai trade friendly pre-fight banter before going their separate ways.

"You..." Hub spoke up after the two had left to spend the downtime before their match relaxing. "You don't really think Chisao would fake his own kidnapping, do you?"

"I hope not, but..." Lan hesitated.

"But...?"

"But it might be better than the alternative of him really being kidnapped."

"That... that wouldn't happen, ri–" Hub began, only to be interrupted as Dex came barreling back into the room.

"LAN!" Dex looked frantic with worry. "Have you seen Chisao come back this way?!" When Lan shook his head no, Dex looked horrified. "Oh no... I can't believe this! I lost sight of him for just a moment and now I can't find him! What if something happened! What if he ran off and got lost?!" Dex took a sharp breath as something else occurred to him. "What if he's been *kidnapped* ?! Lan, you have to help me find him!"

Lan was in the middle of trying to calm Dex down when his PET beeped with incoming mail. He really hoped it wasn't what he thought it was, but those hopes were dashed when Hub began reading it.

"I have Chisao. If you want him back, accept my challenge."

"He *was* kidnapped?!" Dex wailed. "This is terrible! CHISSAAOOO!"

"Hold on, Dex, let Hub read the rest!"

"I've prepared several clues that lead to my location. Use them to find me. If you fail..." Hub paused and began that sentence again. "If you fail... Chisao forfeits his life."

"WHAT?!" Dex's attitude turned to furious in an instant. "Give me those clues! I'm gonna find this creep and teach him a lesson he'll

never forget!"

"Ack!" Lan jumped at his friend's intensity. "Get ahold of yourself, Dex! You can't go off half-cocked like this!"

Dex huffed for several moments, but the furious red faded a bit from his face. "Okay, I'm fine, finish reading the message..."

"Okay," Hub agreed before continuing. "There is one condition: Only Lan can accept this challenge. If anyone else interferes, the hostage dies."

"What?" Dex blinked in confusion. "Why Lan? Chisao's *my* brother!"

"Don't worry, Dex," Lan assured him. "Whatever this person's game is, I promise I'll get him back."

Apollo and Hephaestus watched as Chisao went around leaving the clues to his self-orchestrated kidnapping, just barely staying one step ahead of Lan and Hub.

"The great Apollo wonders why the mighty Lan and Megaman are playing along with this..."

"Well, they said it themselves. They can't be completely certain that Chisao is the mastermind given their current knowledge. And besides, if they didn't play along, then who knows what could happen to the boy while he is on his own. Perhaps his fake kidnapping could indeed become real. What does your foresight tell you?"

"The great Apollo's foresight tells him that the mighty Lan and Megaman will solve the issue long before that becomes a credible possibility."

Dex worried as he watched Roll. exe and Turboman. exe face off against each other. Lan still wasn't back with Chisao and even though they'd convinced the tournament coordinators to hold Dex and Lan's match second to buy time, he was starting to wonder if Lan would make it back for their match.

'Dang it...' he swore to himself. *'It's like... It's like someone's trying to fix the match or something! What a rotten stinkin' thing to do! If they make Lan miss our semi-final match, then... Then I'll withdraw! This is an honor match between men! Winning by forfeit isn't winning at all!'*

"What is the matter, bother?" Apollo watched as Hephaestus frowned while looking at the events. The match between the lovely Mayl and Lan's mighty apprentice Kai had ended with the former emerging victorious. And now the mighty Dex was doing his best to stall so he could have his honor bout with his mighty rival.

"I missed it before, but the scenario doesn't seem to be playing out the way I tried to prompt it to. With the divergent timelines having different tournaments, I had to resolve it so that the events included two tournaments each happening at once utilizing the baseline players and a few others to fill empty slots. What *should* be happening right now is two final matches to decide two champions, not two semi-final matches to decide two finalists..."

"The mighty Apollo thinks you should stop worrying, brother," the sun god shrugged. "In the mighty Apollo's humble experience these things have a strange way of sorting themselves out."

"The life of my friend's brother is at stake! The match doesn't matter next to that!"

"Chisao! Are you hurt? Come on, Dex is worried sick about you!"

Chisao fidgeted guiltily as he followed Lan back into DenDome. He'd thought to help his big brother beat his enemy, but all he'd done was make both of them scared and worried. As they approached the doors to the competition arena, he could hear the vicious roars of the disapproving crowd.

"If you disqualify Lan, I'm gonna withdraw too!"

Chisao's heart nearly broke when he heard those words. Out of everything in the world he hated, hurting his brother was the one he hated most. He'd thought that helping him win would make his running off better, but it seemed that he'd only gotten his big brother in even more trouble.

"Really?" another voice asked in surprise as Lan grabbed him and dashed for the doors. "Then I guess I have no–"

"WAIT!" Lan yelled as he burst through the doors with Chisao.

"And all is right with the world," Hephaestus smiled.

"Ah... the great Apollo thinks you should look at this before you claim that, brother," the sun god interrupted.

Hephaestus looked over at the recent mortal activity log Apollo was gesturing towards, and the meeting between an already eliminated contestant and the loser of the previous match.

In particular the single utterance of a second-person pronoun with the utmost loathing. (15)

"Heh..." Gutsman. exe chuckled as he stared at Hub and cracked his digital knuckles. "Don't think that just because you rescued Chisao that Dex and I'll go easy on ya! I like that ya helped out and all, but this is a battle between men! It's no place to hold back!"

"Wouldn't have it any other way, big guy!" Hub grinned back as Lan sent him a couple of Cannons to start the battle off.

"Bad luck for you Lan!" Dex yelled out in the real world. "Check out what we pulled on the first chip draw! Rockcube! Rockcube! GodStone!"

"Program Advance!" Gutsman. exe yelled as he raised his fists and formed a gigantic hammer that he slammed into the ground. "MOMQUAKE!"

"Oh... nuts!" Hub could hear Lan's eyes widen in that exclamation.

"Whoa!" Hub yelped as the ground shook ferociously and boulders began dropping down all over the place. It was all he could do to dodge out of the way.

"And that's not all!" Dex's grin was audible. "Gutsman! Show him the new GutBuster!"

"Yeehaw!" Gutsman. exe cheered as his arm formed into a cannon that he began firing rapidly at Hub as he continued to try and dodge the boulders.

Hub was respectably fast, but nowhere near fast enough to dodge everything that came his way. Still, as the program advance died down, he retaliated with the cannons, getting a few good hits in himself.

"Wow, this just isn't your day, Lan," Dex continued. "Take this! Triple GutsImpact!"

"Oh, yeah?" Lan retorted. "Try a triple M-Cannon!"

"Program Advance!" both navis yelled together.

"Zeta Cannon 3!"

"Zeta Impact!"

The dueling advances tore up everything in the arena, but left the two navis mostly unscathed.

"Heh... not bad!" Gutsman. exe cheered and formed his Guts Hammer again. "But not good enough!"

This time the impact cracked what few digital tiles had survived the previous exchange and outright shattered the damaged ones. Then Gutsman. exe raised his fist, ignoring the repeated hits from his opponent's Mega Buster, and sent a flying punch that Hub tried to duck but still got clipped by.

"Not bad yourself!" Hub grinned back. "You've certainly gotten a lot better!"

"You bet!" the larger navi laughed as he reared back for another punch. "And this time I'm gonna *win* !"

"Not so fast!" Hub's arm turned into a LongSword and slashed, the damage from the hit throwing Gutsman. exe out of his attack.

"Heh..." the muscular navi grunted in respect as he straightened up. "Good hit... You got guts... Same as ever."

"Back at ya," Hub grinned back.

"What say we finish this like men? The best we got, all or nothing?"

"Sounds like a good way to finish this off!" Hub agreed, feeling an odd resonation in the moment, but too focused on the fight to pay it much mind.

"Well then, let's do it right!" Dex yelled. "GutPunch! IcePunch! Dash!"

"Spreader times three!" Lan replied.

"Program Advance!" Gutsman. exe yelled as he reared back his fist. "PUNCH!"

Hub slid under the massive rapid-fire fists and aimed his buster at Gutsman. exe. "Hyper Burst!"

"Gutsman... DELETED!"

The cheers of the crowd drowned out anything that might have followed.

"Huh..." Hephaestus blinked as he tracked the navis of the two who had just encountered each other. "It looks like they're headed for the tournament's battle computer."

"I'm sorry!" Chisao wailed suddenly as Dex congratulated Lan on his win, getting the attention of Lan and his older brother. "I wasn't really kidnapped! It was all my idea to make Lan late so big brudder wouldn't lose!"

"You idiot!" Dex barely refrained from whacking Chisao on the head. "Do you have any idea how worried we were?! Lan! I take full responsibility for my brother's actions!"

"I'm sorry!" Chisao added, mirroring the deep bow Dex had performed.

"It's okay..." Lan decided not to say that he'd suspected the thing was Chisao's idea from the get-go. "The important thing is that you're..." Lan trailed off as the battle computer next to him activated suddenly, projecting an arena into the air like it did for the matches. "...safe?"

"I got you now, you demented clown wannabe!"

"W-w-wait! C-c-c-can't we t-talk this out?"

"What in..." the tournament referee blinked in confusion as a pair of navis resolved on the display. The forms of Colorman. exe and

Turboman. exe were clear to the entire stadium.

"Talk it out?!" Turboman. exe stated in a dangerously calm voice. "Your playing with the traffic system nearly killed a bus full of people, my operator included! All for your sick laughs!"

"Hey now!" the referee tried to intervene. "Get out of there! The Mr. Programs need time to repair the datascape after the matches!"

"L-l-look..." Colorman. exe ignored the man, "that's i-in the past, right? W-we can all b-be friends and COLOR BALL!"

The clown-like navi suddenly launched the massive ball his torso sat atop at the car-themed navi who simply backhanded the thing away from him in fury, heedless of the damage he must have taken doing so, before launching a pair of burning wheels. "TURBO WHEEL!"

The wheels slammed into the surprisingly short (without his ball) Colorman. exe and knocked him to the ground.

"You want to play with traffic?!" Turboman. exe roared as his body changed into a racecar form and his tires squealed as they revved to high speeds on the digital landscape. "THEN LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT IT'S LIKE TO PLAY *IN* TRAFFIC!"

"No, stop!" the referee yelled frantically.

Colorman. exe got a panicked look on his face as he summoned a pair of totems, one red, one blue. "FireTower! AquaTower!"

"BURN RUBBER!"

"Well... that's *one* way to make sure there's no final match..." Apollo mused as he watched the two combatants basically destroy the battle computer.

Hephaestus just rubbed his temples. Between Yggdrasil and mortals, some intended scenarios worked themselves out in *weird* ways...

"You know..." Lan mused as he and Mayl walked to their homes late that evening, "I didn't know you could *do* that to a battlecomp..."

"Actually, from what I read it's not all that hard," Mayl smiled as Lan carried the trophy which had been presented to them both in a rather hastily arranged ceremony for the tournament organizers to save face in light of not being able to hold a final match. On account of their battlecomp's datascape being so badly damaged that the thing was little more than a giant hunk of metal. "There's something in the battle program that prevents damage from the fight from affecting the datascape too badly, but when it's in standby mode..."

"Ah, gotcha," Lan nodded.

"Well, this is me," Mayl said as they got to her house, pausing in the walkway.

"Did you want to have the trophy first?" Lan asked, wondering what the hold-up was.

"Oh!" Mayl started. "Um... No, that's fine. I mean... You know that new theme park is supposed to open next week, right?"

"Yeah..." Lan blinked, a little too worn out from the events of the long day to examine those strange memories of his to figure out why that sounded important. "Why?"

"Um... well..." Mayl hesitated. "Nevermind... Good night, Lan..."

Lan continued blinking for a minute after Mayl had retreated into her house before shrugging and heading to his own next door.

"NOO! Lan you mighty imbecile! You *follow* a girl when she does thammrrpphh?!" Apollo began to yank mightily on the object that had been thrust into his mouth before leveling a glare at Hephaestus when he finally extracted it.

"Okay," the forge god grinned unapologetically, "I probably could have just *told* you to put a sock in it, but I thought this would get the point across better."

Dex scowled as he watched Gutsman. exe be accosted by a pair of black HeelNavis on the net the day after the tournament.

"Do you have any idea how much your losing cost us?" the first one asked. "And after we went through the trouble of fixing the match for you! Do you know how hard it was for our operators to talk that kid into kidnapping himself so your opponent wouldn't make it in time?!"

"Yeah!" the other one scoffed, apparently not intimidated by the fact that his opponent was over three times his size. "You owe us, buddy!"

"Yeah, you either pay up or face the consequences!" the first added again. "If you don't, we might have to take your operator's kid brother for real!"

"Gutsman..." Dex growled out in barely suppressed fury.

"No worries, Dex," Gutsman. exe assured his operator as he stared down the two. "I got this covered."

"Hah! You bulky navis are all alike! All brawn and no brains! Well, try this! IronBody!" the first HeelNavi stepped forward as his body turned to metal. "It doesn't matter how powerful you are! My defense is so strong now you'll barely put a dent in me as I pummel you into oblivio–"

The second HeelNavi watched in horror as Gutsman. exe *moved* , reaching out with one of his giant hands, grabbing the metal form of his partner, and squeezing so hard that the navi's metal form sprouted a spider's web worth of cracks. All in an instant.

"W-w-wha...? H-h-h-how...?"

"What's yer rank?" Gutsman. exe asked as he continued squeezing the life out of the other HeelNavi through his IronBody defense.

"M-m-m-m-my r-r-rank...?" the HeelNavi stuttered in confusion.

Gutsman. exe responded by holding up a trio of battered and beaten emblems bearing, in order, the numbers 4, 5, and 6.

"Oh... ohshitohshitohshitohshitohshitohshitohshitohshit..."

"You wanna come up to me and make threats, you better have one a' these. Otherwise yer only gonna get scraped off the bottom a' my foot..." (16)

"Ouch. The great Apollo does not think these imbeciles properly understood who they were facing."

Dr. Regal blinked as he studied the reaction of the asteroid to his latest scans. That kind of reaction was only possible if...

"Heh heh heh..." he chuckled slowly as he turned away from his station.

"Dr. Regal?" one of the other scientists asked curiously as he moved towards the door. "Going out?"

"Something just came to mind," he answered vaguely, ignoring the other scientist's confused blinking. "Don't mind me, I'll be right back..."

With that, he strolled for the door at as sedate a pace as he could manage to hide his interest. After all, it wouldn't do to draw more suspicion from his 'colleagues' than they would already possess.

'Heh heh heh... If this is what I think it is... I could accomplish my goals far sooner than I ever expected!'

"I'm not evil!" Apollo blurted out in a rather deliberately poor imitation of Dr. Regal's voice. "I intend to use the asteroid to subjugate all the world's nations under my iron-fisted rule while laughing sinisterly at high volume, but I'm totally not evil!" (17)

"To be called here to help in our world's defense is a great honor. As we share the same planet, now let us protect it together."

"I agree, Dr. Hikari. If we focus enough energy into a laser beam, we can shift the asteroid's course to miss us. It is perhaps the best that our technology has to offer. What do you all think? I vote for Dr. Hikari's plan."

Yuichiro Hikari watched the calm monocled figure of Dr. Regal step leave the building out of the corner of his eye. The man might come across as amiable and even friendly, but the fact remained that he was the head of the mysterious military state known to the rest of the world only as 'Nation Z', no other confirmed information available and a lot of very disturbing rumors. His science was sound, but his motives...

"Have you found anything yet?" he whispered to his PET when the other man wasn't looking.

"No, Dr. Hikari," the voice of his navi replied. "I have not. The security of 'Nation Z' is tighter than I have ever encountered before, and riddled with powerful viruses the likes of which few could even survive. It will take me time to find out the information you desire."

"Hopefully that is time we have."

"Spoiler alert! That is totally–"

"I'll use the sock again. I really will."

"The great Apollo is shutting up now." (18)

Lan had remembered rather quickly upon waking up the next morning why Mayl mentioning the new amusement park had seemed important. He'd then promptly spent the next week fretting over the thing. Should he act as clueless as he remembered? Or should he take a chance and actually ask Mayl this time around like he should have the first time?

Then there was that niggling sensation he'd been getting since he got to her house that he'd forgotten something...

But anyway, Mayl and Roll. exe had prompted Lan and Hub to go to where the announcement of the park was being made and when the orange and grey working navi made the offer of free tickets, they hadn't even needed the two girls' not-so-subtle prompting to take the challenge. The viruses hadn't been that hard for him either, though they were clearly a level above what the average navi was supposed to be able to handle if the nervous look in the park navi's eyes was any indication.

"You know..." Lan mused as Hub and Roll. exe jacked out with the FreePasses, "since Hub and I were the ones who did all the work getting these, I think it's only fair that we get to take you to the park when it opens..."

Lan did his best to hide his worry at the shocked look on Mayl's face. Had he been too forward? Had he somehow managed to make her not want to go with him anymore?

"W-well... um..." Mayl stuttered, her face blushing pink. "I-I think that would be–"

"BOWWOWWOWWOW! BOWWOWWOWWOW! BOWWOWWOWWOW!"

Lan and Mayl jumped about half a foot each at the sudden loud barking sound coming from next door, Lan also turning pale as he recognized the sound.

"That's our house alarm! MOM!" Lan yelled as he raced out the front door of Mayl's house as fast as he could go, tearing across the lawn between the two and nearly knocking his own front door off its hinges as he tried to make it in time to stop the intruder he'd completely forgotten about until right then. Tearing through the living room and up the stairs, he came to a screeching halt at a most unexpected sight.

His mom, perfectly fine, standing over an unconscious seedy-looking guy, and holding a frying pan. (19)

'Oh... right,' Lan breathed a sigh of relief. *'We told mom that we'd heard a rumor about someone breaking into homes and attacking the residents over breakfast this morning.'*

"The winner and still undefeated champion:" Apollo announced with his hands covering his mouth for a distortion effect. "The lovely Haruka Hikari and her amazing frying pan!"

Lan blinked in surprise as he arrived at the Castillo theme park. He and Mayl had agreed to meet at the entrance this morning after the burglar was picked up by the officials, one of them apparently recognizing the guy as a suspected member of Nebula.

At least he thought they'd agreed to meet at the park entrance. His mom had heard that he'd asked Mayl out on a date and promptly

gone cheerfully ballistic, making it a little hard to be sure of what Mayl had been saying.

Then again, he'd somehow managed to wake up early for the occasion, and–

"Lan!" Mayl yelled as she ran up to where he was standing and put her hands on her hips. "Wow, Lan. Didn't you hear me calling back in the Metro? I swear I was in the car behind yours on the way over!"

"Uh... sorry..." Lan rubbed his head sheepishly. "I was kind of focused on getting to the meeting place we set..."

"Hmmm... So you didn't hear me because you were focused on coming to meet me? I guess I can forgive that."

"Wow, how generous..." Lan rolled his eyes. "Anyway, why don't we go on in?"

"Okay!" Mayl smiled as the two went and scanned their FreePasses.

As they walked casually into the park, Lan wracked his brain for a topic to break the ice, and blinked as something occurred to him. "Hey, Mayl, did you ever follow up on that City NetBattler license? I know you got a ZLicense the same time I did, but I never saw you at any of the others."

"Actually, yeah," Mayl blinked a bit. "Well, kinda... After the whole Gospel thing, Dex learned that you'd gotten an ALicense and insisted on getting one himself. Yai figured we should humor him for the BLicense exam at least, but after that she and I kind of lost interest..."

"A shame," Lan mused. "I bet you and Roll could have gotten an SLicense easy."

"W-what?" Mayl's blush was audible. "I-I mean I was thinking about taking the ALicense exam coming up in a few days, but an

SLicense? Me and Roll? I... wait... you took the SLicense exam, didn't you? And you didn't *tell* us?!"

"Er..." Lan rubbed his head sheepishly and pulled up his City NetBattler credentials on his PET and showed it to Mayl. "We managed to earn a *triple* SLicense, actually." *'And Hub is now the king of the Undernet after WWW's last scheme, but I don't think we'll tell you that just yet...'* Lan added mentally as he watched Mayl's jaw drop in astonishment. Then he spotted the growing crowd of early arrivals gathered around a park official and sighed as he realized that even if the flunky that had broken into his house had been captured, this part of Nebula's plan was still happening. "And it looks like we might need them. Come on, I think the park may be having some net troubles we can help with."

Hephaestus blinked as the odds of Loop success jumped by almost ten percent at Lan's encouragement. They'd been fluctuating up and down, with an overall drop of about five percent from the original chances, but not more than a percent or two at a time.

"Aw, yeah! The great Apollo congratulates you, mighty Lan, on your excellent taste in battle babe companions! Now, all you need to do is get her into a nice form-fitting battle uniform, something with a bare midriff, and–"

"You do realize that she is a pre-teen mortal, right?"

"Well, yeah," Apollo blinked in confusion, "but so is the mighty Lan. The great Apollo does not see the problem, for the appreciation of hotness can never begin soon enough!"

"...And you wonder why Artemis is always mad at you."

"Man, I'd hate if Hub and I ever had to fight You and Roll."

"And just what do you mean by that? First you say we're good enough to try for an SLicense, but then you've got a triple SLicense! Do you think we're good enough or not?"

"Ack! No! I mean yes! I mean... Honestly, I think you'd kick our butts..."

"Hmph! I'm not sure we believe you... We might have to test that theory soon... Oh look! Ice cream! Get me some, Lan? Please?"

Lan shook his head. After that little hiccup following the reactivation of the park systems (and some additional FreePasses for later visits as thanks from the park staff), the date had been going swimmingly. Mayl had dragged him all over the park to look at shops and go on pretty much every ride in sight. There'd been enough twists and turns on the roller coasters that Lan was sure he'd left his stomach behind a few times and there'd been a few water rides that had left the both of them soaked and laughing.

And now they were headed for the Vampire Manor, the park's haunted fun house attraction. As they approached, Lan couldn't help but think of Shademan. exe and what he'd probably be pulling in short order.

"Hey, Mayl? Can I talk to you for a second?"

"What in the world are you doing?" Hephaestus asked as he spied Apollo typing away on his portable terminal.

"Oh, just a fun little surprise," the sun god smiled, causing the forge god's eye to twitch.

"Why did Mayl want to do this if she's too scared to come with me?" Lan sighed as he walked through the haunted vampire manor. The decorations were pretty cheesy overall, but the lighting was dim enough to up the spook factor considerably.

"EEEeeeeeekkk! Wwaaaaaaa!" Mayl's voice screamed as she came running pursued by either a cheap automaton of someone in costume, causing Lan to blink as the two raced past him. "Wwooooo! Woooo!"

"Was..." Lan blinked some more. "Was she laughing?"

If not, it was probably the happiest look of terror he'd ever seen on someone.

Shrugging and going after Mayl at a slower pace, Lan took a moment to look at a dynamic statue of Django the Solar Boy, probably one of his favorite shows whatever the timeline. As he looked, something happened that caused him to blink in shock.

"Did... did he just wink at me?"

"Sneak previews of coming attractions!" Apollo grinned widely as the statue proceeded to glance downwards, prompting Lan to find the GunDelSol1 battlechip.

"Damnit Apollo! Don't play around with the scenery like that!"

"You know that guy from yesterday? The one who broke into my house? It turns out he was after that thing Shademan dropped, said it was a DarkChip, and I was just thinking that his group might send someone else after it. So, if that happens and you're there, I want you to do me a favor..."

Those words went through Mayl's mind as she put herself between the automaton of Princess Halberd and a group of children. The automatons, or ToyRobos, of various characters represented at the theme park had started going berserk right as she'd left the vampire manor and she'd sprung into action, despite not really having any clue what to do about it, and...

'Wait... is that a jack-in port on the ToyRobo?' Mayl blinked as she spotted the familiar piece of technology. It wasn't hidden at all either, meaning it was probably meant for park visitors to use. "Alright Roll! Lan thinks we're SLicense material, then it's time to start acting like it! Jack in! Roll, execute!"

"...Does Artemis know you like to sing girl power ballads?"

"SiskeepstryingtogetthegreatApollotostopactually," the sun god rushed out during a gap in the lyrics. (20)

"You mean to tell us that you didn't read *any* of the story plaques in the park?" Mayl giggled as Roll. exe and Hub jacked out of the TinMan.

"I was kind of focused on spending time with you..." Lan blushed defensively. *'I cannot* believe *I forgot how the stories went! Shows me for getting overconfident and thinking I didn't have to read them again...'*

"Aww..." Mayl teased, "that's sweet. We'll have to send Roll and Megaman in later so they can enjoy the rides. Kind of neat how they put in attractions for navis too. But that looks like all of them."

"You sure?" Lan asked. "I think there was at least one more."

"Really? I don't see any more out here..."

"Wanna bet the last one went into the Vampire Manor?"

"Ugh... an already creepy, though fun, attraction with a berserk automaton waiting to attack someone for real? Yeah... we better check and make sure."

The two rushed over to the Vampire Manor, only to find out the dim lighting inside had pretty much gone out entirely.

"Okay, something's definitely up here," Mayl admitted. "But how are we supposed to find our way around?"

"There," Lan pointed to one of the glowing artificial candelabras placed at the end of each intersection. "We use those as guides to find our way around."

"You know, if the situation wasn't dire, the mighty Apollo thinks this would be a fantastic opportunity for–OW!" (21)

'Okay...' Hub told himself. *'Keep it together. You know what Shademan's planning. You know there's ways to hurt him without resorting to DarkChips. Even if Lan and I haven't quite figured out what those are yet... What in the world changed between this time and next time the first time around? Whatever. We can do this without the DarkChip. I know we can.'*

"Brrr..." Roll. exe shivered, probably from how creepy the current situation was, not that Hub blamed her. Creepy red cyberwater (at least they both *hoped* it was water) on the ride, creepy background music, creepy navi guide, and then... "We're not nearly as big a fans of the show like you and Lan, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't supposed to end like that..."

"Yeah, Dracky pretty much fried and didn't get back up, much less attack Django while on fire," Hub replied, ignoring the dark chuckling of the guide as they reached the end of the ride and disembarked.

"Okay, let's just switch the ToyRobo off and..." Roll. exe trailed off as she noted a distinct lack of a certain vital component on the cyberscape. "Where's the control switch?"

"What?" Mayl's voice asked in confusion from the real world. "But..."

"If there's no switch, how can we shut it down?" Lan finished.

"Oh, that thing..." the guide navi chuckled. "It was a nuisance, so I got rid of it. Wh-wheee!"

"Shademan!" Hub growled. "I thought something was off about you!"

"Wh-wh-wheee!" the false form of the darkloid laughed. "How astute of you! Did you enjoy my improvements to the story of Django, the Solar Boy?" he asked as he floated up, became covered in shadows, and reverted to his true vampiric navi form. "Wh-wh-wheeee! It has been a while, Megaman! Do you know what I want?"

"The DarkChip..." Hub glared back.

"Well you can't have it!" Roll. exe joined in the glare.

"Pretty little desserts should hold their tongues," Shademan. exe sneered. "And while I would love to let you keep the DarkChip, Megaman, and watch it drag you into the darkness, I'm afraid that particular one is a special prototype necessary for the future plans of Nebula. We could make another in time, but my leader so despises unnecessary delays, so if you would just hold still... wheee!"

Shademan. exe flew forward suddenly, the talons on his feet outstretched, only for Hub and Roll. exe to dive out of the way to either side.

"Wh-whee... Not bad..." the vampiric member of Nebula chuckled. "And now I see you have blocked me from jacking out. How clever... Your deletion will surely be delicious... But... I suppose I could be persuaded to spare your lives if you just give me the DarkChip."

"You want it?" Hub exchanged a subtle glance with Roll. exe and pulled the darkly glowing piece of data out. "Here!"

Shademan. exe seemed surprised at how easily he'd gotten what he wanted as Hub tossed the chip into the air towards him. The vampiric navi began to grin as the DarkChip sailed towards his waiting hands... only for a bright arrow to lance through it at the last

moment, shattering the data and causing its DarkPower to be snuffed out like a candle flame.

"You..." Shademan. exe hissed as he turned to see Roll. exe with her arm formed into a cyberbow. "You are a very troublesome dessert... How *dare* you interfere...!"

"Because we asked her to!" Hub yelled back. "We'd never let you get your hands on that chip!"

"Wh-wheee!" the vampiric navi gave a chuckling hiss. "You will both pay for that mistake with your lives! I'll suck every last drop of your energies until there isn't even a husk left!"

"Here he comes!" Lan and Mayl yelled together. "Double routine set!"

"Execute!" Hub and Roll. exe prepared themselves.

"Prepare to become one with the darkness!" Shademan. exe screeched as he flew forward in a blind rush.

Hub dove to the side and returned fire with a Cannon chip, only for Shademan. exe to turn into shadow upon impact and reform elsewhere, this time ready to attack. The vampiric navi let loose a blast of sonic energy that forced both of his combatants back before summoning several bats to chase them down and vanishing.

Roll. exe shot the bats down while Hub accepted the Lifesword Program Advance from Lan and slashed at where Shademan. exe had reappeared, resulting in the same shadow fade as before.

"Damnit!" he cursed.

"Language, Mega!" Roll. exe admonished as their opponent reformed. "Cover me!"

This time Hub took the bats out while Roll. exe charged up her primary weapon, doing his best to ignore the darkly pulsing chip data that had just appeared in his folder.

"It's useless!" Shademan. exe laughed as Roll. exe's arrow had much the same effect as Hub's attacks. "I am one with the darkness! Only the dark can harm me!"

"Or maybe the light!" Mayl yelled. "Try this one on for size! Sanctuary!" A set of HolyPanels appeared around Roll. exe. "And now Holy–"

"Not so fast!" Shademan. exe charged at Roll. exe in a sudden burst of speed, wings spread, talons outstretched, and murder in his eyes.

Hub didn't even realize what he'd done until it was all over. He'd just moved and slashed, bisecting the vampiric navi at the waist.

"Mega..." Roll. exe looked at him and the dissipating DarkSword that had formed over his arm with wide eyes. "What did you just...?"

"Wh-wh-wheee..." the top half of Shademan. exe chuckled sinisterly despite his wounds. "He... used his... dark powers... wh-wheee... Already... a DarkSoul... sprouts within him... Intoxicating... is it not...? The power... of the dark... The thrill... of sheer power... You will... be a fine addition... to our ranks... Megaman... It is... inevitable... The dark... is now part of your soul... I hope... you remember me... when it consumes you...! Wh-wheee..."

As Shademan. exe chuckled his last, the two halves of his body turned slowly gray along with his fading laughter, and then when they had lost all color they crumbled to digital dust in silence.

But his laughter still echoed in the minds of the humans and navis that had witnessed his demise.

"You're being awfully quiet," Hephaestus observed. Apollo had been more-or-less his usual self right up until the mortal power known locally as a DarkChip had been used. Then he'd gone silent. The success chance had also dropped by a whole twenty percent, but

Hephaestus had been expecting something like that if use of the DarkChip couldn't be avoided.

"I was hoping they wouldn't have to do that..."

Hephaestus blinked at the sudden shift in Apollo's speech and looked over to where the sun god had closed his eyes with a thoughtful look on his face. "What–"

"Can't talk right now, need to concentrate."

Hephaestus was somewhat taken aback. Sure, he knew Apollo's idiocy was mostly an act, but seeing the sun god being serious was still somewhat jarring.

"I take it their use of dark powers is even more significant than Yggdrasil is indicating?" Hephaestus asked, and waited for a response. And waited. And waited. "Well, is–"

"I'll need leave to increase the number of tandem intersections with the branch I run," Apollo said suddenly.

Hephaestus blinked. "I'm sorry...?"

"If you want those two to get through this reasonably intact, they'll need to properly connect with Django. One meeting won't cut it. They'll need at least two. Possibly three to be sure."

"I thought we agreed the other two baseline intersections aren't completely stable–" (22)

"We did. That was then. This is now. I'm not saying they can't succeed as-is, but it's not likely to be pretty."

Chaud leaned back thoughtfully. Once again, it seemed that Lan was right in the middle of things. And he'd known more than Chaud was comfortable with.

Such as the name of Nebula. The DarkChip syndicate that had activity all over the world, slowly manufacturing the powerful and rare DarkChips that drew navis that used them too much deep into a realm of darkness called 'Murkland', corroding their minds and turning them into twisted evil versions of themselves.

They were mostly active through flunkies at the moment, but there were at least two higher ranked navis so steeped in darkness that they were known as 'Darkloids'. A fact so well guarded that even most members of Nebula didn't know the term, but somehow Lan *did* . And by the look of surprise on his girlfriend's face, she hadn't heard it before.

But that wasn't the most troubling part. Lan had looked him in the eye and warned him not to play around with the powers of darkness, even if he thought he and Protoman. exe were strong enough to handle it.

'If only it were that simple... Still... how could he know?'

"The amazing Lan knows all and has seen all...! Well, not yet, but it'll probably feel that way after a couple hundred Loops."

"I'm not sure whether to be relieved or annoyed that you're back to normal. We haven't even gotten the approval back yet, so how do you know things will work out?"

"The great and prophetic Apollo does not understand why you feel the need to ask such a question, brother."

"Interesting... Losing Shademan and the DarkChip has caused quite the serious setback. However, in losing them a rather interesting development has taken place. Megaman... Yes, he will provide us with quite the powerful DarkSoul in time..."

Chuckling was heard, and then sinister laughter. But, really, no one else was around to listen.

"Th-th-thank you for taking my request..." the generic green NormalNavi shuffled in embarrassment. "I... I know I shouldn't have b-bragged about having a girlfriend in the f-first place, but it was very n-nice of you to help me save face anyway... I... I'm s-still surprised that a p-pretty girl like you is a city NetBattler..."

"It's fine..." Roll. exe smiled tolerantly. "Just try getting a girlfriend on your own before you go bragging about it again. Then you won't need to call anyone to bail you out. Now, if you would just mark this job completed..." (23)

"Oh, right!" the green navi started. "I d-don't know where my mind is... haha! Say... um... I kinda had f-fun, so would you be willing to... ah... g-go out with me for real...?"

"I'm sorry," Roll. exe apologized politely, "but I already have someone I'm interested in. If I didn't need the job completion to qualify for the ALicense exam later today, I probably wouldn't have accepted."

"A-an ALicense?!" the green navi sputtered in shock.

"Yep!" Roll. exe smiled. "And then we're gonna try for an SLicense!"

"B-but... but they t-take on *dangerous* jobs! You could g-get hurt!"

"We weren't sure either," Mayl replied kindly, "but the guys we like said we should give it a shot, so here we are. Thanks for signing off on the job though! Come on Roll! Time to jack out!"

"Wait!" the green navi yelled. "Can you at l-least tell me this guy's name?"

"His name's Megaman!" Roll. exe smiled cheerfully before jacking out in a beam of light.

"...Megaman..." the navi muttered darkly. "For encouraging such a delicate f-flower to put herself in danger... I will n-not forgive you!"

Lan smiled as he raced out the door. It had been a week since the incident at Castillo (where his and Mayl's actions in saving the park had netted them each a free lifetime pass as thanks for resolving the situation before anyone got hurt) and the tournament official had finally shown up that morning with a Point, telling them that to qualify for the new tournament, they had to collect fifty in all.

"Heh... Hey, Hub? Do you think this one will be called the Hawk or the Eagle tournament?"

"Hmm... My money's on Eagle. Because I'm sure Mayl and Roll will be there and those weird memories of ours show her in an 'Eagle' tournament."

"Eh... makes sense, but those memories aren't all completely reliable lately. I'm going with Hawk. Hey, you think we'll get to face Flave Yamakawa?"

"Maybe. It'll certainly be interesting to have a cooking match and..." Hub paused as something occurred to him. "Wait... Is that why you asked mom to teach you how to cook curry? Just in case you got in a curry cookoff?"

"Well, that and I can now make tasty curry when I'm on my own," Lan admitted. "Mmmm... curry..."

"Just don't let your stomach do the thinking during a NetBattle..."

"And now the mighty Apollo must demand an answer to a very important question: How well can the mighty Lan's stomach

NetBattle?!"

"Speaking of food, the gyros are ready."

"Awesome!"

Lan and Hub were not at all surprised to learn that the site of the Hawk tournament (24) was the Princess Halberd's castle attraction at Castillo theme park. What did surprise them a bit was that even with their foreknowledge they actually hadn't been the first to complete the prelims this time. They weren't anywhere near the last however, which meant they still got to see a few of their other competitors arrive.

He'd spotted Atsuki standing off to the side trying to play it cool and decided not to poke that volatile personality just yet. Seeing Riki had been a bit of a surprise as well. They'd expected him, and the way he was constantly checking the area around him wasn't a surprise, but even with memories of the guy they hadn't really been prepared for him to be so freaking *big* .

He hadn't spotted Flave, which was a little disappointing. He rather hoped the guy made it into the tournament. He also hadn't spotted 'that-which-could-not-be-forgotten-no-matter-how-hard-one-tried', but he didn't think his luck was good enough that said individual would be absent.

Then their friends started showing up. Mayl and Roll. exe were expected, even if their strange 'future memories' insisted her presence and the tournament name were a mismatch, but seeing Mary Towa and Ring. exe arrive with them had completely thrown Lan and Hub off. He'd almost forgotten that Yai's Netopian friend was still in town!

"Hey Mary!" he greeted cheerfully. "You're entering the tournament?"

"Well, yes," Mary smiled as she approached sedately. No one would ever be able to tell by looking at her that she suffered from a heart condition. "Ring decided she'd pretend to be delivering messages this morning and went off to gather Points. She seems convinced I need more friends."

"Well, you do!" Mary's very extroverted navi chirped from the introverted girl's PET. "And it worked, didn't it?"

Lan chuckled, thinking that Mary couldn't object that much to Ring. exe's actions. After all, even if Ring. exe had gathered the points, Mary had still come to present them herself.

"Long time, no see, Lan," a familiar voice interjected, causing Lan to turn and see the face of Sal, the young environmentalist (and expert lunch maker).

"Hey, Sal!" Lan waved cheerfully.

"I don't believe the rest of us have properly met. I'm Sal. I run an obento stand and with my navi Woodman, I am the head of Electopia's most prominent environmental group... Well, at least I was..."

"Is something wrong?" Mayl asked with concern.

"Nothing you should concern yourselves with at the moment," Sal assured them, though Lan had a good idea what the problem was and was already making plans to contact Dex to help out if he ended up otherwise occupied when it came to a head. "I have come to participate in the tournament to clear my head and return to the problem with a fresh perspective."

"See, Mary?" Ring. exe chimed in as they all went to get the three girls properly registered. "You're already making new friends!"

Lan chuckled as the tournament official registered the three and told them that with eight entrants, pairings would be announced shortly.

The tournament was to take place over four days, the first block of round one being later today, the second block tomorrow, the semi-finals the day after, and the finals the day after that. Lan suspected that it was partly to help Castillo promote itself, particularly after its near-disaster of an opening, and sell more tickets during the days the tournament was held. Tournament entrants apparently received complimentary FreePasses for the duration of the event as well (not that Lan or Mayl needed those, meaning they'd probably give them to their friends), as well as automatic e-mail updates on match-ups, match times, and match winners if they desired them.

"Ahem!" a voice came over the intercom. "We are now ready to announce the pairings of the first round! All participants present please direct your attention to the tournament board!"

Lan looked at the board and immediately found their opponent.

"Flave and Orr?" Hub's raised eyebrow was blatant even if you couldn't see his face. (25) "That's an even worse pun than Tetsu and Bo..."

"Who cares? It should be a fun match regardless," Lan retorted. *'Yes! Curry cookoff here I come!'*

He was so excited about the impending culinary duel that he completely neglected to check what the other match-ups were.

"This Viddy Narcy character reminds the mighty Apollo of someone..."

"Narcissus?"

"Goodness no. The girly-man-thing Viddy Narcy is not nearly in love with himself enough."

"So..." Flave asked smugly as Lan tried the young chef's curry. "Impressed?"

The boy had every right to be smug. His curry had apparently been so good that a renowned elderly food critic had almost literally gone to heaven after trying it (from the great taste, not possible poison). Which had been a bit freaky to watch, actually.

"It was pretty good," Lan admitted with a thoughtful look on his face, doing his best to not let on that he was gauging Flave's reaction.

"What?!" the boy chef fumed in indignation. "Just 'pretty good'?!"

"Well... yeah," Lan continued, thinking his words over carefully. He wanted to be honest, but he also wanted to get challenged to a curry cookoff. "The flavor's great, but... I really think I prefer my mom's curry... I wonder what's in hers that isn't in yours..."

"Why... you..." Flave fumed and sputtered, completely at a loss for words as Lan continued to not offer the highest of praises to his cooking. "Utter nonsense! Clearly you have no sense of taste! You don't deserve to eat such a delicacy!"

"Wow... you really can't take criticism, can you?" Lan huffed, not having to act offended. No, he was plenty offended for real. "Besides, I bet anyone with a navi could use that machine to make great curry!"

" *What did you say?!* " Flave practically roared. "If you think you can make better curry than mine with this machine, then you just go ahead and try you... you... culinary philistine! A cook-off! Between you and me! A cooking battle before our NetBattle!"

"All right!" Lan yelled back. "You're on!"

"You called my act ridiculous! If you and your operator had been nice instead of a pair of spoiled brats, I'd have just put you to sleep for a

bit, but instead you mocked my work! I wrote it, I acted in it, I produced it, and I directed it!"

"No wonder it sucked..."

"And you make fun of it! Just like that! Videoman! Take care of the little strumpet!"

"Excuse me?!"

"Ring, you don't have to stand there and take that. Go ahead and jack out. We'll deal with them during the match."

"Not so fast! Pause!"

"Ack! I... I can't move!"

"You must act it out like Viddy wrote the scene... The script doesn't call for you to succeed... And to make sure... Rewind!"

Mary fumed as she directed her navi around the net in search of the unlocking videos their opponents had hidden. She knew that not everyone she'd meet, much less in a tournament, could be as nice as Lan, Yai, Mayl, Dex, or even Chaud. But this 'Viddy Narcy' guy... girl... *thing* was an order beyond anything she'd ever experienced. Beyond anything she'd ever considered possible.

It was enough to give her heartburn worse than the time she'd eaten Lan's super-spicy curry on a dare from Yai.

Lan bounced up and down excitedly as the judge tried Flave's curry first, and seemed to actually explode from how good it was. He wasn't entirely sure if he could win this, but it kind of felt good to actually know what he was doing when making the curry this time instead of just following some hasty instructions from some navi claiming to belong to the 'Cooking Master', who his 'future memories' informed him was Flave's father.

"I'll tell you!" Flave grinned happily as the elderly food critic from before tried to guess what his secret ingredient was. "My special ingredient! It's... bean paste!"

"Aha!" the food critic exclaimed.

"Bean paste in curry?" Mami, the announcer for the Hawk tournament who had somehow been pressed into covering the cooking battle by the organizers to enhance the tension for Lan and Flave's upcoming match, exclaimed. "What a bold recipe this is! Excellent, Flave! And now it's time for Lan's curry to be judged! Can it measure up to the boldness of the genius boy chef?"

"Heh!" Flave chuckled. "No way!"

"It's not over yet!" Lan shot back. "Judge?"

"Alright..." the food critic marched over to Lan's cooking station and tasted his curry. Everyone held their breaths as the man got a faraway look on his face. "Wha... what's this? This warmth and longing...?

"Oh, dear..." the ghostly voice of an amused elderly woman sounded across the area.

"S-Satoko?" the man asked in disbelief. "But... how can this be...? You died ten years ago..."

"The mighty Lan's mighty curry! So good you'll see dead people!"

"Wow... Even knowing that was coming it was still..." Lan tried to process how he'd won the cooking battle.

"Really bizarre?" Hub finished for him. "Yeah... Oh, hey, I just remembered that we got an e-mail from dad this morning. I got so

distracted by the tournament prelims that I forgot about it. You want to read it now?"

"Sure!" Lan replied happily.

"Lan," Hub read, "I was going over Megaman's data during a break to clear my head and I noticed that a new ability had evolved recently. In what is an absolutely fascinating development that I can't wait to examine further when I have the opportunity, Megaman's soul has harmonized with that of another navi in such a way that he should be able to temporarily gain some of that navi's strength and attributes."

"Oh, man!" Lan smacked his head. "I completely forgot about this!"

"Oh, so *that's* what I felt during the match with Gutsman..." Hub mused. "Anyway, it goes on: I have provisionally dubbed this ability 'DoubleSoul'. I have also developed a training program that I've attached so why don't you give it a try?"

"Awesome! Let's try it out immediately!"

"Are you sure we have the time, Lan?"

"Eh, sure. We're the second match today after all so we've got plenty of time to do the training program and still make it."

"Alright, I'm booting up the training program now."

"And forevermore none would dare say that the mighty Megaman did not have Guts."

"You've just been waiting to use that one, haven't you?"

Mary swore as she made her way to her match with Viddy Narcy. They hadn't found the videos before the alert she'd set so she

wouldn't miss the match sounded, meaning they were going to be forced to fight with reversed controls.

It would be fine... She just had to remember to operate in reverse and use everything she'd learned in the BattleChipGP and she and Ring could pull this off.

She just... needed to catch her breath a bit first.

"Come *on,* Mary!" Ring. exe called insistently from Mary's PET. "The match is about to start!"

"Oooo..." Mayl winced as Ring took another hit from her opponent and went down hard.

"Yeah, ouch..." Dex sympathized. "What was up with those two? I mean... I remember Mary and Ring being better than that..."

"No idea," Mayl replied. "Come on, let's go find out."

"But..." Kai looked torn as Mayl clearly gestured for him to join the rest. "But Master Lan's match is about to start!"

"Oh, don't worry," Dex grabbed the boy in a friendly headlock and began dragging him along. "We'll be back in plenty of time!"

Lan scanned the crowd as he waited for Flave to emerge and join him. Funny... he didn't see any of his friends there...

He shook off any potential concerns as Flave took his spot opposite the battlecomp.

"You got lucky in the cooking battle, but not this time!" Flave declared dramatically. "My techniques are better than yours, I know it!"

"Maybe, maybe not," Lan returned, "but on the battlefield or in the kitchen, it takes more than technique!"

Flave huffed and jacked in his navi Orr, a standard green NormalNavi altered only to possess an apron and chef's hat, as Lan jacked in Hub.

"All right!" Mami announced. "It's another fierce battle to follow these two's cooking competition from earlier! Let's start this! Lan Hikari vs Flave Yamakawa! Battle routine set!"

"Execute!" Hub declared.

"It's over!" Flave and Orr yelled back together.

"Geez, that was terrible Mary!" Ring. exe griped. "It was like you forgot everything about navi operation! It's bad enough you couldn't find those stupid videos our opponent hid! How hard can it be to remember that the operation controls are backwards!"

"Yeah?" Mary shot back. "Well maybe if you had... jacked out when I said... to... It wouldn't have... if you just... listened..."

"If I just listened, what?" Ring. exe huffed.

"Ring..." Mary gasped out as she clutched her chest, "help..."

"Mary?" the navi with twin-tails made of rings paused in sudden worry. "Is something wro–"

Thump *clatter-latter-latter*

"Mary?!" Ring yelled from the dropped PET, the device having fallen just right for her to watch her operator collapsed on the ground, clutching her chest in pain and barely breathing. "MARY! SOMEBODY HELP! 911! 911!" MY OPERATOR'S HAVING A HEART ATTACK!"

"You know," Lan mused as he rode the elevator to the bottom of the Princess Halberd castle, "Flave wasn't that bad a guy, really. He just wants to follow in his dad's footsteps."

"Yeah," Hub mused. "Though I'm still wondering why none of our friends were at the match. Oh, hold on. I just remembered. We got an e-mail partway through the fight from Mayl that said 'do not open until after your match'. Want to read it?"

"Sure, go ahead. Maybe something came up."

"Okay, here we go," Hub opened the message, and his eyes went wide immediately. "Lan, we have to get over to the hospital immediately."

"Why?" Lan felt his pulse jump as he began thinking of possible reasons.

"Mary Towa had a heart attack after her match..."

Hephaestus blinked as the turning of pages registered to his ears, and he looked to see Apollo thumbing through a magazine.

"What in creation are you reading?"

"The Divine Retribution Catalog," Apollo replied absently. "Smiting is passe after all and death is far too quick a punishment for the girly-man-thing Viddy Narcy anyway. Oooo... Unsightly blemishes that draw all of the afflicted's attention while seeming of no consequence to anyone else..."

"...When you're done I'd like to take a look as well."

Apollo simply pointed to an area right next to Hephaestus where a second copy rested. "The mighty Apollo highly recommends their 'poetic justice' selection."

Lan just sat in the waiting room of the hospital. He felt numb. He knew that Viddy Narcy was a cheater and would sabotage a navi's controls... but this... this was just too far. Anyone could tell you just by looking at Mary that she wasn't exactly the strongest of NetBattlers but he had still played his usual dirty trick on Mary. He could have warned them. He knew about the tactics Viddy liked to use. All it would have taken was for him to double check the match-ups before taking off and a quick e-mail. And yet... (26)

What was worse was when Mayl told him. Ring was still active and had told Roll and Mayl exactly what happened. The fact that Mayl had been outside the hospital with Dex of all people telling her to calm down spoke about just how furious she was. Lan looked down at the battlechip in his hand.

"I don't care how good you are, Lan, what this creep did crossed the line. I won't need this chip for my next match, so take it!"

That hadn't been fun. Mayl was clearly wanting to get back at Viddy more than he was. Yai had eventually gotten Mayl home so she could at least get some rest before her match tomorrow. But it still left him feeling hollow.

"Lan?"

Lan blinked as he looked up. That hadn't been Hub. His PET was empty at the moment as Hub was comforting Ring in Roll's place. It was the only way he had managed to convince Mayl to leave the hospital so the two could rest. But he definitely recognized that voice. "Mamoru? What are you doing here?" Lan asked. "I thought you were cured."

Mamoru smiled. "I'm just here for a checkup... but what about you?" He replied. Lan told him everything. From Mary's condition, to Viddy Narcy having sabotaged Ring. Mamoru... he frowned, but Lan could feel it. Beneath the relative peaceful nature he was showing on the outside Mamoru was as angry as the rest of them. "And you say he's still in the tournament?"

"He's our next opponent." Lan remarked.

Mamoru frowned. "Are you going to go along with his ruse?"

"I want to beat him at his own game." Lan remarked. "This idiot thinks that he can get away with hurting my friends... well, I'm going to show him just what happens when you do."

Mamoru nodded with a smile spread on his face. "I didn't expect any less of a response from you two... and I'm not going to ask you to back down." He added as he reached over. Lan blinked and looked... and indeed it seemed that Mamoru had his chip folder and PET slotted into his wheelchair, even as he pulled out a battlechip. "But I must insist that I get to help out at least," he added with a smile. (27)

Lan just grinned back. "Thanks Mamoru." He stated, taking the offered chip. "Huh... never seen this one before."

Mamoru just winked. "Wish I could talk some more... but I need to get to my appointment." Before he wheeled out of the area though Mamoru stopped. "I'll be watching the match though Lan. You and Megaman show him just what a cheater like that deserves." He added.

Silence filled the room as it was left to Lan once more.

Hub... wasn't fond of hospitals. For some reason these places more than any other seemed to remind him of his own disease. Of what had happened to him. But in a time like this he simply swallowed it down and chose to be a friend first... and someone who wasn't fond of hospitals second. Ring had cried for quite a while even when he had shown up. Now? It was just silence, awkward silence. She knew that he and Lan were fighting Viddy tomorrow. She knew that he was going to pay. But Hub could tell... Ring blamed herself in part for it.

"... Megaman." Hub blinked and looked over at Ring. "You guys better beat him."

"Lan wouldn't let me lose even if I wanted to Ring... and trust me, right now I've never wanted to win against someone so much without the world being at stake." Hub admitted. "Anyone can see Mary isn't well. That she doesn't just have a navi for battle, but to be a friend. To be her guardian."

"Some guardian I ended up being." Ring muttered.

"You can't blame yourself for that." Hub countered. "What Viddy did was sabotage. Worse than that, it's practically assault. You're not to blame for the fact that he outright damaged you. And I know that Mayl, Roll and Mary would say the same."

Ring nodded but sighed. "Here." Ring said as she handed him some... data? "I might not be able to fight back against this guy personally, but I think a Navi Chip works just as well."

Hub just smiled... and finally Ring smiled back.

"An injured friend! A solemn promise! A score to settle! New powers from dear friends! This..." Apollo declared as he whipped out a lyre and strummed an electric guitar riff on it, "calls for a montage!"

"Did you forget there are other matches his friends are still fighting in?"

"Oh... right..." Apollo thought that over for a moment. "The talented Apollo has not played multiple themes at once in a while, but the amazing Apollo is up for the task!"

Hephaestus buried his face in his hands. "You have got to stop hanging around the muses so much."

"Why?" Apollo blinked in confusion. "The supremely lovely muses are nine flavors of hot and appreciate the great Apollo's talents."

Lan stretched as he stepped outside, determined not to let things get him down. Kai had volunteered to keep the morning vigil at the hospital in case Mary woke up and Mamoru of all people had offered to take the afternoon. Which left him free to work on his plan for facing Videoman. exe tomorrow.

beep beep went his PET with incoming mail.

"Hey, Lan," Hub spoke up. "It's from Sal. Want to read it?"

Lan thought about it. "We probably should. If what's going on with Sal is anything like what our 'future memories' indicate, we probably don't want to ignore her. Not after what happened with Mary."

"Right..." Hub nodded and opened the mail. If Sal was dealing with losing her environmental activist friends to the poisoned words of a net terrorist again, they'd be there to help.

After all, her opponent certainly wouldn't.

Mayl took a deep breath as she approached the castle in Castillo to center herself. That reprehensible Viddy Narcy would get what was coming to him. Lan and Megaman. exe would see to that. But that was tomorrow. Today she had a match and she needed to focus herself if she wanted to win.

He opponent might be a generic HeelNavi, colored black, but that was no reason to think he wasn't skilled. Plenty of skilled NetBattlers didn't feel the need to customize their navi's appearance.

"Okay, Roll!" Mayl psyched herself up as she examined the tournament board, confirming that their opponent was still Crusher. "We've gotten this far, we passed the ALicense exam with flying colors and we're well on our way to an SLicense! We can do this! No one's gonna stop us from making the finals!"

"Yeah!" her navi cheered.

"Hah! Yer pretty sure of yerself, ain't yah, little lady?" a deep rumbling voice chuckled, and Mayl turned around. And looked up.

And up.

'Holy...' Mayl's eyes widened at the sight of the man standing behind her also looking at the tournament board, Mayl's size providing no obstacle whatsoever to him doing so. *'This guy's torso is bigger than Dex's whole body!'*

She guessed the man was trying to smile at her, but the way his face seemed to be chiseled from granite made it look like he was glaring sadistically. It was the kind of face that pretty much screamed 'danger' to anyone who saw it.

"I'm Riki," the man rumbled in a way that made Mayl want to look for falling rocks, "Crusher's operator. Yer next opponent."

"I'm Roll's operator," Mayl gulped and bowed politely, "Mayl."

"Heh." the man chuckled deeply. "At least yer polite. Most people tend to run the other way when they see me."

'I don't blame them!' Mayl just managed to keep to herself.

"Anyway, I just wanted to introduce myself and let yah know I won't go easy on yah cuz yer a kid. Or cuz yer a girl."

"Never crossed my mind..."

"Well, that's a good thing. Right, Crusher?"

"You got it, boss!" a firm voice confirmed from the guy's PET. "You said your name's Roll, little lady? Don't you lose too quickly. That'd be a real shame, that would."

"Hey!" Roll. exe piped up from Mayl's PET. "Don't go assuming you'll win!"

"Bwahahahahaha!" Riki laughed in a way that made it sound like the room was shaking. "I like you two! I look forward to our match!"

Mayl managed to remain on her feet until the man walked out of the castle attraction before allowing herself to slide to a sitting position on the floor.

"Yeek... I don't know how Lan handles dealing with people like that all the time..."

"He probably tells himself that he's got awesome friends like us backing him up!" Roll. exe didn't sound quite as confident as she probably hoped.

"Heh..." Mayl chuckled and smiled as she got to her feet, dusting her skirt off as she took a deep breath and centered herself. "Right! No matter what, we've still got our friends, so let's go give it our all!"

Filled with renewed confidence, Mayl walked out to go find something to do until her match, and spotted Riki staring down a little old lady just outside.

No... scratch that. The little old lady was the one staring down Riki... And apparently doing a pretty good job of it from the way the giant of a man seemed suddenly nervous.

"Boss!" Riki managed to project confidence despite his clear nervousness. "Don't make me keep repeating myself! There's no way I'm gonna follow in yer footsteps!"

"Humph!" the old lady poked Riki hard in the chest with her cane, actually making the man take a step back. "Isn't it time you stopped acting like a child? My boy, with your intimidating physique, you are a born gang boss! The perfect person to take over the organization from me! Taking over the Mafia after I'm gone is your destiny!"

'What...?' Mayl's mind locked up and she found herself unable to do anything other than keep listening.

"You want to try winning this fancy tournament so you can turn your back on everything I raised you for and use the winnings to open a bakery?! I won't stand for it!"

"Oof!" the voice of Crusher suddenly sounded from Riki's PET. "Hey! Let go of me you ingrates!"

"Crusher?" Riki looked alarmed as he mashed the buttons on his PET frantically, all his confidence suddenly gone. "Crusher! What happened? Answer me! No! CRUSHER!"

"I'll just keep your navi in a safe place until the tournament's over," the old woman declared with finality. "Then we'll not hear any more of this nonsense!"

"B-b-but..." Riki collapsed to his knees as the old woman walked away calmly and called out after her, "boss! I need Crusher! Please! Give him back!"

'Oooookkaaaayyyy...' Mayl did her best to process what had just happened. Riki, the giant intimidating guy, wanted to quit the Mafia, the freaking Mafia!, and open a bakery. His boss, some little old lady who looked like she knitted in her spare time, wanted him to take over the Mafia instead. And had kidnapped his navi, her upcoming opponent, to ensure his obedience. *'Now... what would Lan do in a situation like this? ...He'd help the poor guy, that's what he'd do.'*

Mayl sighed and proceeded to walk up to the now sobbing man and offer her assistance.

"The ultimate advice for every situation! What Would Mighty Lan Do?"

"When did you manage to make that button anyway?" (28)

Lan had accepted the lunch invitation from Sal, intending to keep an eye out for the events he suspected were happening, and he wasn't disappointed. A candidate for mayor had come by and rather loudly stated his intention to develop ACDC into a more metropolitan area, the man with him bowing and scraping as if the old guy had already been elected.

And then Sal had gotten the e-mail Lan had been waiting for her to get and left for ElecTown square. Lan had promptly called Dex in saying he had a bad feeling that something was wrong with Sal and Dex had promptly come charging along despite not knowing her that well.

"How unfortunate... It seems we will need to do what is necessary without you, Sal."

The thing was... it seemed things might be even worse than Lan had been expecting.

"Lan... Dex... I'm ashamed to admit this, but... I've been losing control of my activist group lately... Some odd navi has been coming into our homepage and pressing our members towards more radical action. And... and they've been listening to him! Despite all my attempts to calm them down, they no longer listen to me... And what's worse... What's worse is that I sent Woodman out to try and talk to the navis of our members last night and... and he never came back... I'm afraid that the odd navi has gotten to him too... The two I was just talking with said that they plan to put a permanent halt to the mayor candidate's ACDC development plan... with cyberbombs! I... I don't know what to do anymore!"

Lan and Dex raced into the DenDome where the mayoral candidate was giving his speech about his planned ACDC development project and raced towards the recently repaired BattleComp to halt the cyberbomb that was most likely planted there.

"Hey! You can't come in here!" a security man yelled as they raced past him.

"No time to explain!" Lan yelled as he and Dex took the stairs several at a time.

"Why are you interrupting my speech, you tw–oof!"

"Outta the way, gramps!" Dex yelled as he shoved the guy to the side and began to jack Gutsman. exe into the battlecomp, Lan right behind him. "Jack in! Gutsman!"

"Jack in! Megaman!"

"There he is!" Hub yelled as he appeared next to Gutsman. exe and spotted a navi hovering near a cyberdetonator. "Gutsman! Restrain him!"

"Yeehaw!"

"No!" the navi yelled as he got into a stance. "I won't let you sto–urk!"

"Okay! Hold him while I disable this thing! But don't hurt him!"

"You got it!" Gutsman. exe shot Hub a thumbs-up before turning a glare at the navi. "Ya know you're making your friend Sal sad by doing this, right? She's real disappointed in all of ya."

"I... er..." the navi looked torn between determination and guilt as Hub finished disabling the device. "I..." the navi hung his head in defeat. "I've made a terrible mistake... Forgive me..."

Roll. exe was a little surprised at how easy it was to slip past the guards around Crusher. They were so inattentive that she had the urge to sneak up behind one of them and start making faces, but she managed to restrain the impulse.

After all, this was much more than a simple navi kidnapping. From what Mayl had overheard, this was the start of a bloody coup that could cost both Riki and the old woman mafia boss (who was

apparently Riki's mother, though birth or adopted hadn't been made clear) their lives.

"Well, now. If it isn't the little lady Roll... What are you doing here?" Crusher asked curiously.

"Rescue mission," Roll. exe related curtly. "We gotta get you out of here before they get around to deleting you."

"What? Why would they do that?" Crusher seemed genuinely surprised.

"They're convinced that without you, Riki will be a pushover and they can then rub out the current boss and take over without opposition."

"Fat lot of good knowing that'll do us with this cage here..." Crusher sighed. "Okay, miss. Think you can take this cage out?"

"Maybe... Though I'm not sure I can do it without hurting you..." Roll. exe mused.

"Heh..." Crusher got a determined gleam in his eyes. "Don't you worry about me. I'm as tough as they come. You just do whatever you need to."

"Okay!" Roll. exe nodded firmly as Mayl sent chip data to her. "Here we go! Sanctuary! HolyDream!"

"Hey!" a voice called out sharply as Roll. exe's shots shattered the cage and left Crusher smoldering from the backwash. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"The lovely Mayl and the enchanting Roll are raining on your villainous parade!" Apollo struck a dramatic pose, clearly copied from a certain ace attorney. "Like a *boss* !"

"Apollo, Phoenix Wright just called. He's suing you for copyright infringement." (29)

"Wait, really?" Apollo blinked in confusion.

"No," Hephaestus stated bluntly. "No mortal has access to my office number and you know it. But I'll find a way to let him know you were ripping him off."

"But... but that pose was classic long before he existed!"

"Tell it to the judge."

"Woodman!" Hub yelled as he and Gutsman. exe reached where the tree-themed navi was standing guard over... something that didn't look too friendly. "Why are you doing this? Do you really think Sal would want something like this?"

"Yeah, man!" Gutsman. exe grunted, rolling his shoulders where he'd been clipped by a few of the WoodTowers that Woodman. exe had been defending the area with. "She's been cryin' and everything over you going off and leavin' her!"

"She... has?" Woodman. exe seemed confused. "But... I'm doing this for her... She'll understand later... Won't she...?"

"No, she won't!" Hub yelled. "Woodman, you're helping a criminal! Sal would never want something like that!"

"Yeah!" Gutsman. exe agreed loudly.

"What are you all chatting about?" an oily voice sounded from behind them. They all turned to see an official-looking navi approach, clearly angry. "Woodman! Get rid of these intruders! They are interfering with the defense of the nature that your beloved Sal loves so much! Didn't you say you'd do *anything* for her?!"

"...You're right," Woodman. exe said after a long moment. "I did say that. And I would..."

Hub suddenly felt nervous about the way events were headed.

"...but what you're asking is the same thing that those who destroy nature for greed and personal gain do!" Woodman. exe finished with a fierce expression.

"You *dare* betray me?!" the oily-voiced navi fumed. "Then you can suffer the same fate as these fools when I unleash my special cyberbombs! When I'm through, the whole world shall know me as Bomberm–urk..."

Hub blinked. Gutsman. exe blinked as well. The spiked WoodTower had come out of nowhere and impaled the terrorist navi straight through the torso.

"I never should have trusted you..." Woodman. exe glared as the navi began to be deleted from the critical damage suffered.

Mayl was currently terrified. Riki had gone back to being his completely confident self with the return of Crusher, but it seemed that the guys who had been plotting against him had decided to just cut to the chase and kill Riki.

And anyone who knew what they were up to, such as her.

"Hmph!" Riki glared back at the smaller men. "Crusher told me everything! About how you were going to off the boss and take over!"

"Heh..." one of the smaller men chuckled, apparently not intimidated by the fact that Riki was over twice his size and mass. "So you know... Now there's no way we can let you live!"

"Stop right there!" the firm voice of the old woman from before declared, and Mayl turned to see the woman right behind herself and

Riki.

"B-Boss?" the two traitors seemed as shocked to see her there as Mayl was. How did that woman get there without anyone noticing?

"Hmph!" the old woman huffed. "I never dreamed you twits would hatch such an outrageous plan! You're a hundred years too early to take the likes of me out!"

"Argh!" one of the men panicked. "We'll have to get rid of them all right now! Get 'em!"

As the traitors rushed the unworried old lady, Mayl wasn't sure where the instinct to close her eyes came from. She was certain that the sounds of violent brawling were utterly brutal, and that she was surprisingly pain-free.

Opening her eyes, she saw perhaps the last thing she was expecting at that moment.

"Did..." Apollo blinked repeatedly at the display, "...did the great Apollo just watch a little old lady use the Raging Demon technique?"

There were some things that even great foresight just could not prepare one to experience.

"You did," Hephaestus nodded calmly.

"But isn't that–"

"–one of the signature moves of Akuma from the Street Fighter branch? Yes it is."

"Di–"

"No, there hasn't been any code leak from what I can tell. Not unless it was also somehow incorporated into the baseline data."

"The great Apollo finds your interruptions–"

"–annoying?" Hephaestus smirked. "Think of it as mild payback for all those eons you went around finishing everyone's sentences."

Lan sighed as he watched Atsuki walk smugly from the arena. The match between Woodman. exe and Burnerman. exe had... well, it had gone pretty much as one might expect a match between a wood-element navi and a fire-element navi to go. Woodman. exe had gotten some good shots in, but the type advantage had simply proved too much in the end.

But now, it was time for Mayl and Roll. exe's match with Riki and Crusher. And as the two were introduced, Lan cheered for his girlfriend at the top of his lungs.

Ring. exe sniffed to herself as she moped in the hospital network, the monitoring system next to Mary's bed to be specific. She'd only left it for a few moments to turn the television on to the channel that was covering the Hawk tournament, as well as the Eagle tournament elsewhere in Electopia.

Aside from knowing that Mayl had won her match today, Mary would have liked to learn that Chaud was competing in the Eagle tournament and had won his match against some navi named Windman. exe. Even if she denied it, Ring. exe knew she had a crush on the boy. (30)

"Mary... I'm so sorry..."

"Ring...?"

"Mary?" Ring. exe blinked and rushed to the screen display to look out at her operator stirring faintly and opening her eyes. "Mary! You're awake!"

"Hi Ring... What'd I miss...?"

Ring. exe teared up in the cyberworld and began blubbering the way only sheer relief could cause. "I'm so sorry! I rushed the check on your pacemaker yesterday so I could go get the points needed for the Hawk prelims and register you even though I should have really asked you this time but I thought you'd be okay and then that stupid narcissistic girly boy actor thing showed up and I didn't get away from his navi in time and I got all messed up and missed checking your pacemaker again while making you search for those stupid video things instead of thinking about what would happen and... I'M SO SO-ORRY! IT'S ALL MY FA-A-AULT! I'M A TERRIBLE NAVI-I-I-I!"

"Silly..." Mary smiled weakly. "I'm the one who should have gone to a nurse the moment Videoman hurt you like that instead of trying to tough it out... The hospital navis could have taken care of my pacemaker and I should have called all those friends you helped me make to help on that ridiculous scavenger hunt... It's my fault... not yours..."

"No i-it's not!" Ring. exe sniffed as she argued back.

"Ah, good, you're awake," an unfamiliar voice spoke up from the doorway and cutting off further attempts to claim responsibility.

"Do I... know you...?" Mary asked as she shifted her gaze to a somewhat scrawny boy in a wheelchair.

"No, but I believe we have a mutual friend by the name of Lan," the boy smiled. "Plus the nurses saw fit to put you in my old room. I'm Mamoru Urakawa. Nice to meet you."

"The amazing Mamoru is the nicest proprietor of a hive of scum and villainy that you can ever hope to meet!"

Apollo blinked as his proclamation was met with silence.

"What, no scathing retort, brother?"

"No, that's pretty accurate."

Mayl stretched as she got up that morning. Today was the day for many things. Today was when Lan would face down Viddy Narcy for what happened to Mary.

But as much as she'd have liked to focus on that, it was also the day she'd be facing her and Roll. exe's next opponent: Atsuki and his flame-based navi Burnerman. exe.

And she was certain that if she gave that fight anything less than her full attention, it wouldn't end well for her or Roll. exe.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you a favor."

'Here we go...' Even with his memories being a bit hazy there was no way that Lan could forget the... *unique* challenger that was Viddy Narcy. He didn't have anything against how the man (woman? Lan honestly didn't care either way) dressed or his... assumed lifestyle if it wasn't just a role he was playing up. No, the problem Lan had with Viddy Narcy was that the man was an arrogant, annoying, condescending cheater. A cheater who had put one of his friends in hospital. Who had almost lead to the death of a young girl. "A favor?" Lan asked. His voice was barely kept in check.

"I want you to let me win!" Viddy said.

"What."

"I know it's a crazy thing to ask." Viddy started... and Lan had to resist the urge to laugh as the 'producer' started putting on the fakest sad look he had ever seen someone put on. Although he would give the man credit for adding a tremble to his voice. It made him curious

as to just how many people had actually fallen for it. "My Videoman only has a very short time to live."

"Oh no, what's wrong?" Lan asked. "Is it because he's sick?" The only thing that could make bad acting like this more entertaining was to encourage it to extremes, and Lan needed for it to be entertaining or he'd end up punching the guy.

"Very sick! A virus that's just eating him up!" Viddy cried out. "I... I just thought it would make a good final memory..." He trailed off as he sobbed, walking away slowly and muttering about where to bury Videoman... loudly.

"Y'know, if it wasn't for how he's obviously trying to bait me into going after him he might have made it sound believable." Lan remarked.

"Well let's be fair, Lan... you're going to go after him anyway for Mary's sake." Hub said.

At that Lan just smirked. "Oh I am... but first Hub, I need you to send a couple of e-mails... and how well do you think you can fight backwards?"

"Well enough to kick Videoman's backlot carcass from here to Netopia, *sir* !"

Hephaestus examined Apollo's latest costume for a moment before remarking. "You do realize neither of them have ever been part of a military force, right?"

"Oh, ruin all of the mighty Apollo's fun why don't you?"

"You know..." Mayl mused to her navi as she walked into Castillo's castle attraction, "with our upcoming opponent it occurs to me that we don't know too many people who use fire navis."

"Well, elementally themed navis do tend to be in the minority, but you're right," Roll. exe agreed. "Sure, we've met a few elementally aligned generic navis before, there's that one kid in school whose navi has a Heat style, and Turboman prefers fire attacks even though he's null element himself, but the only fully customized fire navis any of our friends have come across..."

"...have all belonged to that Mr. Match guy," Mayl finished.

"Talking about me, lass?" a voice cut into their thoughts, causing Mayl to turn around and glare at the self-proclaimed master of fire himself.

"Match..." Mayl glared at the man.

"Easy there, lass," the man grinned in his self-assured way, "I'm not here to cause trouble."

"Your reputation suggests otherwise," Roll. exe stated evenly as Mayl crossed her arms accusingly. "Especially after what you tried to pull at the DenCity tournament."

"There really is no winning with you lot, is there?" Mr. Match sighed heavily. "But honest and truly, I'm not here to start anything. I'm just here to have a look at this young upstart who thinks he's hot enough to operate a fire navi. Can't have just anyone running around aligned with fire after all... I've got to make sure they have a hot enough spirit!"

"Hehehe...!" a younger voice chuckled and Mayl saw the blue haired Atsuki approach them, staring intently at Mr. Match and grinning. "You're a funny old guy, ain'tcha? I'm Burnerman's operator, Atsuki. Nice. To. Meet. You. That slow enough for you, old man?"

"Well, you're a cheeky little brat, aren't you?" Mr. Match grinned back, but Mayl could see his eye twitching. "And a bit on the cool side. I'm not sure I approve of you handling a flame navi..."

"If I'm cool, it's only because your old-fashioned ranting about hot spirits gave me the chills!" Atsuki shot back. "That's why I can't stand washed-up old geezers!"

'If this is Mr. Match's idea of not causing trouble,' Mayl rubbed her temples as the two began insulting each other back and forth, plus something about a Festival of Flames that she missed, *'we are all in for a disaster...'*

"Well then, why don't we have our navis duke it out and see who's got the hotter spirit between us!" Mr. Match challenged.

"Fine!" Atsuki accepted. "We'll see who's better suited to operate a flame navi!"

Mayl sighed as the two stormed off to duke it out.

"...We're going to have to go after them and make sure they don't break something, aren't we?" Roll. exe asked.

"Yep..." Mayl sighed in response. "Is this what Lan usually goes through? If it is, I may owe him an apology or two."

"Eh, just wear a bikini the next time you go to the beach together."

" *Roll!* " Mayl blushed red.

"Sorry," Roll blushed herself. "I'm not really sure where that came from."

"No! Bad Apollo!" Hephaestus yelled as he continued chasing the sun god around the office with a rolled-up magazine. "Don't put words in the mortals' mouths like that!" (31)

"Ack!" the sun god yelped as he desperately tried to fend off the assault. "Ow! Heeeellllpp!"

"Apology accepted."

"Though Lan would probably still appreciate seeing you in one."

"ROLL!"

If her navi's teasing regarding her emerging hormonal crush on her childhood friend was the worst thing to happen to her on any given day, Mayl would forevermore count it a victory.

As it was, the duel between Fireman. exe and Burnerman. exe was setting fire to areas of the net and causing several electronics connected to it to begin smoking from the data backwash.

Mayl had tried calling a few people she knew with aqau-element navis to help, but none of them had responded yet, so she was racing for Higsby's to see if the former WWW member and chip fanatic might have anything on hand that could help.

"Ack!"

WHACK-tumbletumbletumble

Only for the door to the shop to open up right as she tried to charge through it, leading to her to crash into the person trying to exit.

"Oww..." Mayl rubbed her head as she sat up and spotted the person she'd run over. "Shuko? I am *so* sorry!"

"It's okay..." the accident-prone girl smiled and brushed herself off. "I was just showing Higsby something that Aquaman and I developed."

"And just in time too," Higsby declared as he approached them. "I've been getting all sorts of calls about computers all over ACDC overheating, huh! It's the perfect program to deal with the problem, huh!"

"Really?" Mayl shot the man an interested look. "Do you mind if Roll and I use it to put the net out?"

"Not at all, huh," Higsby blinked and handed the girl a copy of a program bearing the label FireBuster. "Just be sure to let everyone know you got it at Higsby's!"

"Thanks!" Mayl yelled as she grabbed the program and ran towards her house to jack in.

"Wait!" Shuko yelled after her. "Aquaman and I can hel–oop!"

WHAM!

"...Didn't you pretty much flood the net when we last met?" Roll. exe asked Aquaman. exe as the two ran around putting out the flames burning across the cyberworld.

"Er... yeah, *whoosh*" Aquaman. exe blushed. "But... well..."

"You weren't actually *trying* to that time..." Roll. exe sighed as she began to aim at another group of flames. (32)

"Yeah..." Aquaman. exe fidgeted a bit. "*whoosh* I... I... *whoosh* I'll finish up here, you *whoosh* go on ahead and stop whoever's causing this."

Roll. exe did her best to not just blast the two fire navis with the FireBuster as they bickered back and forth just like their operators.

"Brat!"

"Geezer!"

"Wimp!"

"Upstart!"

"Will you all just *cut it out before I hose you down?!* " Roll. exe yelled. "Your fighting is setting the whole net on fire and the next round of

the tournament is about to start!"

"Who cares about the match?" Burnerman. exe scoffed as he continued glaring at Fireman. exe. "I gotta beat this wimp first!"

"Yeah, back off and let me teach this blustery upstart a lesson!" Fireman. exe dismissed the pink navi.

'Okaaayy...' Mayl's thoughts raced as the two, *'what would Lan do in a situation like this...? ...Besides something stupid like I know would cross his mind first and dear gods why can't I think of a better option?'* "You must be pretty scared of us, Burnerman... Atsuki."

"... *What?!* " Burnerman. exe turned his furious gaze towards Roll. exe.

"I mean, we're much stronger than Mr. Match and Fireman," Mayl continued on causing Fireman. exe directed his glare at Roll. exe as well, deciding to run with this now that she'd thrown the gauntlet. "They lost in the first round of the DenCity tournament to Turboman, who we beat in the finals."

"Um... Mayl? Are you sure about this?" Roll. exe backed up a step nervously.

"Yep! And whoever wins our match will be facing Lan and Megaman, who've beaten Match every time they've fought!"

"Bwahahahaha!" Atsuki's laughter came over the connection. "It that true, geezer?! You were really acting so high and mighty with a pathetic record like that? Hilarious! You're not hot at all!"

A sound came over the connection from Fireman. exe's end that sounded a lot like grinding teeth.

"That means..." Atsuki's grin was audible. "That means if I win this tournament, Burnerman and I really are better than you and

Fireman! Alright Burnerman! Jack out and let's get to Castillo for our match!"

"Alright!" Burnerman. exe grinned sadistically as he exited the net in a flash of light.

"Why you..." Mr. Match's strained voice choked out after Burnerman. exe had left.

"Was any of what I said untrue?" Mayl asked with as much sweetness as she could muster.

"Grrr... Fine! But you better beat that brat, lass! If you lose to him after saying all that, I'll never forgive you!"

A moment later Fireman. exe jacked out as well and both Mayl and Roll. exe let out gigantic sighs of relief as the flames the two fire navis' conflict had created died down.

Lan rolled his eyes as he walked into the stadium. Viddy looked like he was about to burst out laughing as he did... but Lan didn't care. It hadn't been too long since he and Hub had 'fallen' for Viddy and Videoman. exe's cheap trick, however at this point he wasn't even bothering to hide his rage anymore. "Viddy Narcy. You're a liar, a cheater, and a few more words that I can't say while this tournament is being broadcast." Lan growled out. "It's bad enough that you tampered with Megaman's controls using Videoman, I can adjust to that... but you're showing just how utterly stupid you are by doing it twice in a row!"

At this point the crowd went quiet. All eyes were on Viddy. "Why whatever could you be talking about?" Viddy tittered. "Are you talking about my previous opponent? Such a shame about the poor thing, but it's not *my* fault if the girl is so sickly that she can't NetBattle properly... or that she has a Navi so incompetent that she can't even keep track of her NetOp's condition."

Lan glared at Viddy... who actually flinched in response. It didn't hurt that in those eyes Viddy would see the stare that Lan saved for only those who had harmed his friends personally. Or it might have been a loud bellowing of rage from elsewhere in the stadium. "You're a moron. I was thinking about holding back... but I should show you just who you messed with. And when you do, you should remember... at least Ring and Mary could keep up with me."

"Such a brat. Eliminating you from this tournament will be a welcome sight!" Viddy stated with a smirk.

In the audience there were some less... polite about what they thought of Viddy. Chief among them was the man known as Mr. Match. He hadn't seen any of Lan's friends nearby but he was personally furious at Viddy. Not because he cheated in his match or endangered a life. That would just be hypocritical given what he had done in the previous tournament. No, what angered him the most was that the man had done all of this... completely for the sake of satisfying his own ego! At least when Match put lives in danger he had the common indecency to be doing it for a reason, or for the WWW, or something like that! What was worse was the man had absolutely no reason to injure the girl. At least between him and Lan, the boy had ruined his plans so many times before. He wasn't so much angry at Viddy for being such a villain, but for being a *terrible* villain.

"Oh my, some serious accusations right off the bat!" Mami noted. She glanced over at Lan but he shook his head. "But it seems despite the claims that Lan still wishes to battle! So, Lan vs. Hidenosuke Yamashita! Battle routine-"

"No! I'm Viddy Narcy! Don't you dare call me by my real name!" Viddy declared.

"My bad!" Mami said with a smile... although Lan could see even the referee was beginning to be irritated by the flamboyant NetBattler.

"Lan vs. Viddy Narcy! Battle routine, set!"

"Execute!" At this point some people gasped as they looked up. Megaman. exe faced away from Videoman. exe but still took on his usual fighting stance.

Videoman. exe chuckled. "Don't you know that a video is never as fun if you're trying to watch it in reverse?" he asked before he pulled out an oversized roll of tape. "Wind Cutter!" he declared as he flung it at Megaman. exe who stood still. "What's wrong, twerp, can't face the battle?"

"AreaGrab!" Lan declared.

Suddenly Megaman. exe vanished from sight and the Wind Cutter passed by harmlessly as he appeared behind Videoman. exe. Soon enough he fired off a hail of shots at the navi... who grinned as he simply extended some tape between his arms and blocked the blasts. "Hah, what're you going to do now? Nothing can get past my Tapeline! I think it's time I cancelled your show!" he declared as another Wind Cutter started to appear in his hand.

"Virus Chip: Spikey!"

"What chip?" Viddy declared even as the blue fire virus appeared in front of Megaman. exe, blasting off a fireball towards Videoman. exe which forced him to dodge out of the way. "Oh, I see... because you can't control your navi like a rank amateur, you've created another villainous minion for us to fight!"

"Oh just shut up already!" Lan declared. "You're not a hero and this isn't according to one of your scripts, because any half intelligent director would throw you off the set! Holy Shock!"

Viddy and Videoman. exe both blinked at that declaration. "Oi, Viddy, give me something here!" the video-themed navi declared as he flung the Wind Cutter at Megaman. exe... only for the blue navi to thrust out his arm, flinging forward a green spark that blasted it's way

through the attack and raced towards Videoman. exe. "That attack can move!"

"Ugh, well it's the mark of a good writer to alter the script around useless actors, Fast Forward!" Viddy declared as he slotted in one of his custom chips for Videoman. exe... and the audience was treated to the sight of Videoman. exe constantly forced to run away from the powerful blast as he tried to wait it out. Occasionally he had to leap back to dodge a blast from the Spikey. "Come on you useless navi! Are you going to let this amateur show you up?"

Videoman. exe growled... but before he could say anything the spark collided with him... only for the video-themed navi to leap out of the dust thrown up by the attack unharmed.

"Wait, didn't he get hit by that attack?" Atsuki asked. He and Mayl, the next battlers on after Lan and Viddy, were in the waiting room for their battle.

Mayl shook her head. "No, he showed some kind of projection trick in the last match." She explained. "The spark probably hit a projected copy of Videoman... but I'm pretty sure that the match is going to be over now." Atsuki looked at her and cocked his head... and Mayl grinned. "When Lan gets like this, he plays smart. Everything so far has just been set up."

"Heh... I'll enjoy facing him after I've beaten you..."

"Keep dreaming."

As Videoman. exe leaped into the air he gathered another Wind Cutter and chuckled to himself. His body still glowed the red of the Fast Forward Chip. There was no way that even with regular controls that Megaman. exe would be able to dodge this one. But as he went to throw it another shape leaped up at him... and he flinched. as Ring. exe floated in the air right in front of him... and then he felt

them hit. Two sparking rings collided with Videoman. exe before reversing direction and doing so again, sending electricity coursing through his body as he crashed to the ground and the red glow faded. Videoman. exe groaned, about to bark at Viddy to ask what was taking so long for a Rewind chip.

"Boomer in, triple download!"

That caused Videoman. exe to glance over at Megaman. exe as he held up a glowing boomerang. "Program Advance: Hell Boomerang!" Megaman. exe declared as he flung the Boomerang at Videoman. exe at breakneck pace. Videoman. exe stiffly pulled up his tapeline to block it... only for it to suddenly be burnt away as the Spikey's fireball blasted it. As the boomerang swung past Videoman. exe they split into three... and each one swung back around and cut into the navi.

"Viddy, quick, use-"

"AreaGrab! Elec Sword!"

Videoman. exe cried out again, as Megaman. exe suddenly blurred across the battlefield. He hadn't even seen him slice, but now the navi was right in front of him... and if it wasn't for the fact that the electricity coursed through him, leaving him stunned he'd retaliate. Videoman. exe could only watch as Megaman. exe looked at him... and he saw that glare. The same glare that the navi's NetOp had been giving Viddy. The look of a warrior fully prepared to kill. So it frightened him even more as Megaman. exe raised his hands.

"Not going to work on my watch." Viddy snarled as he finally put in a Rewind chip. While Videoman. exe couldn't move the chip would heal him. And once he did, once he got past the attack, then Videoman. exe could take advantage of the boy's recklessness and-

"Air Hockey, triple download!"

Viddy paled at that as did his navi. Both Megaman. exe and Lan had shouted that in unison, moved in unison. He had heard rumors but to bear witness to a navi and human in Full Synchro frightened Viddy. "W-wait, about your friend, there must be something I can-"

"Program Advance: Pit Hockey!"

For Videoman. exe it was like he had been hit by hundreds of blows at once as the hockey puck zipped out of Megaman. exe's hands and blasted around the arena at a breakneck pace. It battered him over and over again and left him unable to make a move. And it only made his stomach drop as the two shouted out once more.

"Sword, WideSword, LongSword, download! Program Advance: Life Sword!"

And with that... Videoman. exe knew only oblivion.

"Flawless Victory!"

"That's a pretty good impression. How long did you have to practice to get your voice to do that deep echoing rumble?"

Lan panted as he stopped and looked at the screen... and sighed. They had done it... they'd won. Hub grabbed the Pit Hockey out of mid air, as Videoman. exe's data deleted. "You did say you wanted to bury Videoman somewhere nice didn't you?" Lan asked coldly. "Where else is nicer than an amusement park?"

"Ah, to be buried in an amusement park... how nice of you Hidenosuke..." the voice of Videoman. exe sounded from Viddy's PET. He sounded... really out of it.

'Okay, maybe we overdid it a bit...' Lan sweatdropped as Viddy screamed at his navi to not use his real name while Videoman. exe began to deliriously ramble about how the afterlife looked a lot like

the inside of a PET. It was entirely likely that the tournament safeties against actual navi deletion were the only reason the video-themed navi survived in any capacity.

"Useless navi..." Viddy growled as he disabled the speaker on his PET. "Miss, disqualify this ruffian! He had no right to treat my poor Videoman that way! He went too far!" he declared.

"Oh will you shut up already?" The group paused. Mami had opened her mouth... but it hadn't been her who had bellowed that. Nor had it been Lan or Hub. But rather, it came from the crowd. "So you lose to the kid despite cheating, and then you suddenly claim that he's playing unfairly?" Mr. Match shouted. "That's just pathetic, there's no spirit behind the way you do things... heck, there's no *brains* behind it either!"

"And who says I cheated?" Viddy shot back. "I'm just the poor victim of a young man being angry over his friend's navi being useless and-"

"Lan!" All eyes shifted at this point as one Kai Todoroki burst out onto the stage. "I got your e-mail! Are these the three release programs you were talking about?" he asked as he walked up to Lan. At this point, Viddy was sweating.

"Release programs?" Mami asked. "To what?"

Lan smirked. "Oh, Viddy knows... don't you? After all, these programs are shown to be made by one Viddy Narcy... designed to release navis from his sabotage."

"N-now hold on, those could be any programs..." Viddy stuttered even as he backed up a little.

Lan stepped forward. "You know, you never asked me what my name was when you gave me yours earlier. So let me tell you." Lan said. "I'm Lan Hikari. The son of Dr. Yuichiro Hikari. I've been raised with a dad who practically reinvented Navis with his work. A man

who works at SciLab. If you're so sure that these aren't yours and you didn't sabotage Megaman... how about we ask someone from there?"

Viddy gulped as the eyes of the entire stadium looked at him. "N-no... I wasn't supposed to..." he trailed off. "I wasn't supposed to lose... the script didn't call for me to lose. The script didn't call for me to... to... to..."

"To almost kill an innocent girl just because you wanted to win?" Lan asked.

"I DESERVE IT! The script called for me to win, and I always play out my scripts!"

"..."

Viddy clamped his hands over his mouth. But it was too late. Two security guards who had rushed up intending to grab Kai instead grabbed Viddy. They walked him out of the stadium. At first there was silence... and then someone clapped. Lan looked up and saw... of all people, Mr. Match was clapping. Soon the entire stadium joined in in applause and cheered. Lan sighed... he honestly hadn't expected Viddy to break down like that. To declare it so willingly. But now... he felt like he had made things a little better.

"Alright everyone! Now that the, *ahem* trash has been taken out," Mami was clearly suppressing the urge to giggle at her own quip, "we can proceed! The next contestants! The burning spirits of Atsuki Homura and Burnerman!"

The crowd cheered as the cocky blue-haired boy strode down to the battlecomp.

"And their opponents: The grade school girl power team of Mayl Sakurai and Roll!"

"And hurry it up!" Atsuki added in a loud voice. "We're tired of waiting around! It's time for action!"

"Hold your horses!" Mayl called down as she descended the steps.

"Finally!" Atsuki snorted when she arrived. "Let's get this started already! I gotta beat you and then that Lan chump so I can prove I'm the strongest and the hottest!"

"You keep telling yourself that," Mayl waved off the boast. "Maybe in a few years you'll actually be a worthy challenge."

"Oh, and it's already starting to heat up down here folks!" Mami declared as the battlecomp's hologram projected the competing navis into the air. "Let's begin! Atsuki versus Mayl! Battle routine set!"

"Execute!" Roll. exe finished.

"Burn baby burn!" Burnerman. exe leered.

"The lovely Mayl and Roll shall forever be hotter than the both of you put together by at least three points on the babe-o-meter! So sayeth the mighty Apollo!"

"You do know that's not what they meant by 'hot', right?"

"The mighty Apollo rejects that reality and substitutes his own!" (33)

"That explains so much about you..."

"Let's heat things up Burnerman!" Atsuki grinned. "BurnerJets in and download!"

"Rockcubes in and download!" Mayl didn't even miss a beat. On the battlefield, a pair of hovering propane tanks materialized and began to move towards Roll. exe, only for a pair of Rockcubes to appear in their path immediately after and block them from progressing.

"Surprised? I studied your match with Sal after all and came prepared! Get him Roll!"

"With pleasure!" Roll. exe smiled as she floated in position and took aim. "Roll Arrow!"

"Not so fast!" Burnerman. exe grinned. "Burner Arm!"

Burnerman. exe unleashed a jet of blue flame at Roll. exe, only to blink in surprise as her form dissolved into a shower of golden sparks right before impact, his opponent reappearing back out of his weapon's range and shooting a pink arrow with a heart-shaped arrowhead at him.

"That's it?!" Burnerman. exe grunted as he was clipped by the weapon. "You're gonna need to do better than that! Atsuki, send me a BurnSaber!"

"I'll do better than that, I'll send three!" Atsuki grinned.

"Again Roll!" Mayl called out.

"Right!" Roll. exe nodded and charged up another of her arrows and shot it at her opponent.

"As if! Burn Sab–!" Burnerman. exe's confident look turned to one of shock as the arrow hit and he was forced to abort his chip attack. "My... my chip data! What the hell did you do?!"

"Didn't you know?" Mayl smirked. "I mean, we did it in our match with Riki and Crusher. Roll's arrows destroy any chip data that's been sent but not used."

"Filthy–" a sudden burst of feedback cut off the rest of that insult, and several turned to look at Mami who didn't quite seem as embarrassed by the 'mistake' as she might otherwise be.

"BurnSaber!" Burnerman. exe yelled during the distraction and charged forward, a jet of flame jutting from his forehead as he

rushed straight into Roll. exe.

"Roll!" Mayl yelled as her navi screamed in pain.

"Hah! If you can't take the heat, then–"

"Cool it!" Mayl yelled as she slotted a battlechip in.

"Blizzard!" Roll. exe yelled as she unleashed a freezing attack that left her fire-based opponent reeling.

"Don't interrupt me!" Atsuki fumed. "Burnerman! Triple flameline in and download!"

"Program Advance! FlameCross!" Burnerman. exe grinned sadistically as he unleashed the attack, only for his opponent to warp out of the way. "And Burner Arm!" he yelled as he opened up with his signature attack as Roll. exe reformed, scoring a direct hit.

"Ha! Give it up girlie!" Atsuki laughed. "Your navi's finished!"

"Roll! Time for the old standby!" Mayl called out.

"As if!" Burnerman. exe leered and prepared to fire again. "Bur–"

"Roll Flash!" the pink navi yelled as she appeared directly in front of Burnerman. exe, her translucent yellow antenna lashing out at him repeatedly and sucking away his vitality to restore Roll. exe.

"Nnnngh!" Burnerman. exe grunted as he felt his body lock up. He'd been in the middle of his attack when that landed!

"What the hell?!" Atsuki stared.

"Oh, didn't you know?" Mayl and Roll. exe smiled the exact same sweetness at their opponents. "Roll's/I'm a heal-element navi!"

"N-no way..."

"And now to finish it!" girl and navi declared together. "BattleChips in and download! Program Advance!"

"It's not possible!" Atsuki yelled as his opponents took identical stances.

"SuperSpread!"

"Burnerman... Deleted!" Mami announced.

"Yeah! We did it!" Mayl and Roll. exe cheered together.

"Wha...?! Bu...?! How...?!" Atsuki began sputtering. "I... I can't believe it! Burnerman defeated... by a *girl* ?!"

"Bwahahaha!" the loud laughter carried all the way from the audience, the one laughing being Mr. Match. "Serves you right you little brat! Honestly, that's the best you can do?!"

"Geezer!" Atsuki was nearly frothing at the mouth. "Get down here and fight me!"

"As if!" Match barked in amusement. "You're not worthy of my attention, brat! Maybe when you stop wetting your pants at the sight of a decent battler I'll change my mind! Hahahahaha!"

A large number of people sweatdropped at the way Match was needling the loser of the battle. Apparently the man just couldn't help himself.

"You... You stinkin..." Atsuki fumed, and several people could swear they saw smoke coming from his ears. "This stupid... stupid tournament..."

"Hey now!" Mami yelled, offended on behalf of everyone who'd worked to put the tournament together.

"I'll burn it to the ground!" Atsuki's eyes flared with madness. "That's what I'll do! Burnerman! Destroy everything in sight!"

"It's an explosion of burning frustration!" the navi's voice sounded about as grounded and calm as his operator's. That is, not in the slightest.

"Hey! You lost, so take it like a man and get out!" Mami yelled hotly, though she backed up a few steps from the boy who was very publicly losing his grip on reality.

"AAARRRRRGGGHHHHH!" Atsuki and Burnerman. exe yelled together as something exploded. That something being Atsuki's PET since Burnerman. exe had apparently decided to start rampaging before his NetOp could even jack him back in. "GAAAHHHH!" Atsuki yelled as the sparks from his PET caused his clothes to ignite. "Hot! Too hot!" (34)

"Stop drop and roll!" Mayl yelled at him frantically. "Stop drop and roll!"

Hephaestus and Apollo sweatdropped as the boy was finally extinguished and rushed to the hospital for moderate burns.

"There is nothing wrong with a burning spirit, but it's one of those things most mortals should really not take literally."

"The mighty Apollo could not have said it better himself."

"As the battle to be Electopia's champ heats up, I can now announce the final pairing for the Hawk tournament!" Mami declared to an energetic crowd. "After many heart-pounding battles, the finalists are none other than the heroes of Castillo, who saved the entire park from a vicious cyberattack on opening day, the gradeschool sweethearts, Mayl Sakurai and Lan Hikari along with their navis Roll and Megaman!"

The crowd burst into tumultuous applause.

"Be here tomorrow for the final match of the Hawk tournament!"

"Roll..." a lone navi whispered to himself as he watched the broadcast. "Don't worry... I'll save you... You'll n-never have to put yourself at risk ever again... Tomorrow... Yes... I have to d-do it then..."

"Oh, she woke up yesterday and has been doing just fine. Did you all want to go up and visit?"

About the only thing that had prevented the group of friends from charging towards Mary's room was the deeply ingrained respect for hospitals. As it was, they still made pretty good time.

"Hey everyone!" the blonde girl waved cheerfully from her bed. "Congratulations on making the finals Lan, Mayl!"

"Mary!" the resounding cry of relief got the group a dirty look from a nearby nurse and they all sheepishly apologized.

"Why didn't you call?" Lan asked first.

"Well," an amused voice sounded from behind them all, and they turned around to see the chuckling wheelchair-bound form of Mamoru just inside the door where he'd be easily missed by someone entering the room, "we talked a bit after she woke up and agreed that it would be a shame to derail the rather impressive build up of righteous fury Lan had. You're rather intimidating when you're angry."

Lan chuckled sheepishly.

"You know it!" Dex laughed, embarrassing his friend further. "Man, Lan, you gave *me* chills!"

"Master Lan was only doing what he needed to expose a base scoundrel!" Kai tried to join in the conversation.

"Anyway, thanks for looking after Mary for us, Mamoru," Mayl bowed respectfully.

"Yeah, as long as *someone's* been keeping her company," Yai huffed.

"Oh, we've been busy watching today's matches and the recaps for both the Hawk and Eagle tournaments," Mary smiled.

"Yeah!" Ring. exe chirped from Mary's PET. "You should have seen Chaud and Protoman in the Eagle semi-finals today. They are sooo dreamy!"

" *Ring!* " Mary blushed.

"Wait, there's another tournament going on right now?" Lan asked the obvious question.

"Indeed," Mamoru smiled as he wheeled himself over to a pair of makeshift tournament boards. Lan and the others recognized the progression of the Hawk tournament right off, but the other one was new to them. "On the other side of Electopia, the Eagle tournament is being held. On the first day of the first round, Chaud and Protoman faced off against a moderately famous medium by the name of Miyu and her navi Skullman."

"I remember them," Lan spoke up. "Miyu and Skullman are pretty good, but not quite as good as Chaud and Protoman."

"Which is why, despite showing good skill, they lost," Mamoru agreed. "The other match that day was the self-proclaimed 'cyber sage' Koetsu and his male FaceNavi that he named Honami, likely after the historic painter Honami Koetsu, and the priestess of Scissor Island and her navi Windman, apparently considered a minor kami by the island's inhabitants."

"Wait, you mean some people worship a navi as a god?" Yai looked incredulous. As did a few others.

"Eh, that's their problem," Ring. exe dismissed. "But Windman was the real thing. Took Koetsu apart like he was nothing."

"Ouch," Dex winced. "I like Koetsu. He always leaves the best advice on my BBS..."

"In any case," Mamoru continued. "The second day had matches between a policeman by the name of Gorou Misaki and his navi Prismman against a fishmonger named Masa and his navi Sharkman." (35)

"Ow... Man, I remember Sharkman..." Hub winced. "He can be a pain to fight."

"Which is how he won his match. But the second match that day was the one I was most interested in as it was between a boy named Tora and his navi Kingman,"

Lan nodded. He recalled Tora from the N1 Grand Prix and he'd always been a strong NetBattler.

"and my aunt Tamako with her navi Metalman."

Lan's brain promptly skipped a groove as he processed that, and after a moment he slapped his face. "That's right... Your mom runs the Ura Inn and Tamako's her sister... How did I forget that?"

"I'll admit, there's not much of a family resemblance between us," Mamoru grinned.

"I take it your aunt won?"

"Indeed she did," the pride in Mamoru's voice was evident. "Both against Tora and later against Sharkman."

"And I'm guessing Chaud and Protoman beat Lilly and Windman?"

"They had some difficulty," Mary admitted, "but they did win."

"Wow... so Chaud's gonna be facing your aunt in the Eagle finals?" Dex asked. "Man, that must be so cool."

"It is," Mamoru smiled. "I'm very proud of her."

"But the match that has everyone talking is you two's," Mary cut in, looking straight at Lan and Mayl. "The 'heroes of Castillo' who took time out of their date to beat off an attack on the park by a cybersyndicate now facing each other head to head? The press is eating it up."

Lan and Mayl blushed as their friends devolved into good-natured teasing until the nurses told them visiting hours were over.

Mayl sighed as she led her navi around the net. She'd woken up that morning feeling extremely nervous about the upcoming match with Lan. Thankfully, there had been a waiting e-mail about an SLicense exam being held later that morning before the tournament was scheduled to resume, so she'd talked Roll. exe into going ahead and taking it. Only the heavens knew just how much a bundle of nerves she'd be if there wasn't anything to distract herself with.

Of course, they'd changed the exam a bit since Lan took it. There was now an extra step past the hellish survival battle.

"Okay, Roll... the 'suspicious navi' they told us about should be around here somewhere and... Roll? Are you listening?"

"Hmm...?" Roll. exe replied absently. "Yeah, I am, it's just... I could swear I've seen the exact same NormalNavi at least five times since we left SciLab..."

"How can you tell the difference?"

"I can't be certain, but I keep feeling like someone's watching me, besides you of course, and when I turn to look there's this green NormalNavi trying, and failing, to act casual."

"Weird... You don't think he's stalking you, do you?"

"Brr... I hope not... Though maybe he's part of the exam?"

"A really creepy part maybe..." Mayl allowed. "Though I suppose if we can't handle creeps like that, we don't really have any business trying for an SLicense anyway..."

"Argh!" the HeelNavi moaned dramatically. "Defeated by the heroine of Castillo! Oh what a dark day it is for the denizens of the undernet!"

"You're a really hammy actor, you know that?" Roll. exe arched an eyebrow bemusedly.

"Sorry," the HeelNavi chuckled. "Force of habit from the net series I was part of until it suddenly got cancelled. Honestly, I'm just happy to find work period these days. Big fan of yours though! I'll be rooting for you later!"

"Thanks," Roll. exe smiled, "that's really nice to... do you hear that?"

"Yeah, I..." the HeelNavi started before his eyes widened suddenly. "I can't move!"

"...me neither!"

"Roll?" the worried voice of Mayl came over the connection. "What's wrong?"

"Someone's using a Tromby virus!" Roll. exe yelled back. "I can't move–ungh!"

Roll. exe felt a sharp blow to the back of her head before she could elaborate.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?! Get away from-ARGH!"

"Roll?! What's going on? I just lost the visual feed! Roll?! Roll?!"

"I'm sorry it came to this... But everything will be f-fine now... You'll see..."

That was the last thing she heard before she blacked out.

Lan stretched as he walked out of Higsby's. He'd just gotten through feeding a bunch of his spare battle chips into the chip trader, mostly getting nothing special with a couple of interesting vends that he'd have to try out later. In any case, he probably needed to head over to Castillo soon and–

"Lan!" the frantic voice of Mayl shook him out of his thoughts.

"Mayl?" he blinked in confusion. "What happened?" As he asked the question, he got a sinking feeling that he already knew the answer. "Did something happen to Roll?"

"Yes!" Mayl was so worried that she didn't even consider how Lan might guess that. "We were taking the SLicense exam before the match later and Roll said she thought some weird navi was following her, but I thought it might be part of the exam, but then we found the actor SciLab hired for the test mission and got ambushed and... Lan, the creep kidnapped Roll! I can't reach her at all!"

"Calm down Mayl," Lan grabbed his girlfriend and tried to will her to get a grip on herself. "Hub and I will get her back, don't you worry. Do you have any leads?"

"Yes, actually," the answer came not from Mayl but from Yai who was running up. "Mayl called me before she went looking for you and I sent Glide to interview the test's actor. He says the guy took off too quick to know where he was headed, but the actor recognized him anyway. Apparently he's a regular shopper in the ACDC area. Glide

asked around and found a netmerchant that delivered a Timpani chip and some trained viruses recently to a certain web address."

Lan blinked. "Aren't those things supposed to be confidential?"

Yai smirked. "Merchants run on two things: Money and reputation. Between offering to put in a substantial order and threatening to leak that he served questionable clients, he talked pretty fast."

"Ung..." Roll. exe moaned as she came to, only to find herself surrounded by mettaur viruses. With the distinct oppressive feel of her ability to jack out being blocked. Oh look, there was that weird green navi that had been following her earlier. And now that she got a closer look at him, she recognized him as the same guy who commissioned a pretend girlfriend on the city NetBattler board a while back. "You!" she accused. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"It's n-not what you think..." the NormalNavi stammered.

"Really? Because I think you knocked me out and are trying to keep me hostage with a bunch of viruses."

"I-It's... I can e-explain! I-I've always liked you Roll... and..."

"And you think that makes it okay to *kidnap me* ?!"

"Y-you don't understand!" the green navi fumed. "Y-you can't N-NetBattle! You'll j-just g-get hurt! I c-can't let you b-be hurt, hehe...!"

"You take one step closer you pervert and I'll stick a Roll Arrow where the sun doesn't shine!"

"Th-that's not a very nice thing to say... I-I'm the n-noble knight, here to protect you f-from that vile Megaman who would p-put you in danger!"

Roll. exe *gaped* at the sheer delusional audacity in that statement. "I... do not *need* ... nor *want* ... *your* protection!" she ground out in barely restrained fury.

"Now, now, n-no need to be angry... I-I'm the good guy he–"

"Wow, seriously?" a new voice interjected sarcastically.

"Mega!" Roll. exe yelled with relief.

"NO!" the green navi yelled as he whipped around to see Megaman. exe staring at him with calm bemused contempt. "You c-can't be here! Roll's mine! All mine! You can't have her back!"

"...You really are a piece of work, aren't you?" (36)

"Shut up!" the navi yelled, getting into a combat stance. "It looks like I'll have to teach you a lesson!"

"Yeah..." Megaman. exe didn't look the least bit impressed. In fact, he was looking straight at Roll. exe and smirking knowingly. "I don't think you're going to get the chance, genius."

"W-what do you mean...?"

"Roll Charm!" his captive called out and a wave of pleasant emotion washed over the area just behind the green navi. He turned slowly to see the mettaurs he'd special-ordered looking at his captive with hearts in their eyes. "Okay, boys..." Roll. exe smiled in a way that was far from nice and pointed at her captor, "get him."

As one, the mettaurs turned towards the green navi and brandished their pickaxes.

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!"

"Oooo..." Apollo winced. "The great Apollo wonders if navis even have proctologists..."

"He's certainly going to need one after that." (37)

"It's time for the finals of the Hawk tournament, folks!" Mami exclaimed as Lan and Mayl approached the Castillo battlecomp. "And here are the finalists! The heroes of Castillo, the lovely Mayl and the graceful dynamo Roll!" Mami introduced as the crowd went wild. "versus her boyfriend Lan and the super fighting navi Megaman!"

The castle attraction *vibrated* from the force of the cheers.

"Are you ready?" Mami asked, getting nods from both competitors. "Battle routine, set!"

"Execute!" Hub and Roll. exe smiled at each other.

"Let's start it off big!" Lan yelled as he sent chip data to Hub. "Triple download!"

"Program Adv–"

"Roll Arrow!"

Hub grunted and swore as the hit cost him the program advance he was about to unleash before opening fire with his Mega Buster, only for Roll. exe to teleport out of the way in a shower of golden sparks.

"You're gonna need to do better than that, Lan!" Mayl taunted. "Especially after you showed me how SciLab's virus breeder works! Virus Chip in, download! Jelly!"

"Ack!" Hub started at the sight of the virus and opened fire on it before it sent a Wave attack his way, allowing Roll. exe to get another hit in.

"I'm not sure you're taking me seriously, Mega..." Roll. exe frowned.

"Try this, then! Thunder times four!" Hub yelled as he sent out a quartet of lazy sparks that Roll. exe easily outpaced, only to get hit by a charged shot while she was distracted. "And AreaGrab!"

Roll. exe blinked as Hub vanished.

"And now this! Triple download!"

"Program Advance! Hyper Burst!" Hub yelled from behind Roll. exe, giving her just enough warning to warp behind him and use her Roll Flash ability to siphon his health and restore her own.

"Get serious already, Lan!" Mayl yelled as she slotted in chips of her own. "Here, Roll! Vulcan times four!"

"AGH!" Hub yelled as shot after shot peppered him.

"Aha!" Lan yelled triumphantly. "You wanted us to take you seriously, then take a look at our brand new power! Unison chip in and download!"

"What chip?" Mayl and Roll. exe asked together.

"Double Soul activate!" Hub yelled as a form of yellow red and gray seemed to wrap around him before releasing in a way that made the cyberscape quake with force. "GUTSSOUL!"

Mayl and Roll. exe stared at what looked like Megaman. exe, but wearing armor patterned after Gutsman. exe.

"And take a look at what it does! ColorPoint! SuperVulcan!"

"Sanctuary!" Mayl yelled as she slotted the chip in just in time for the HolyPanels to protect Roll. exe from the onslaught of bullets.

"Here I come!" Hub yelled as the attack ended, charging in as he charged up.

"Swordy!" Roll. exe yelled as the virus chip was slotted in, along with another. "Scuttle!"

"Whoa!" Hub's eyes widened as he punched the Swordy virus instead of his intended target and got slashed for his trouble, followed by the Scuttle virus blasting him as well with another Roll Flash for good measure.

"So that's it..." Roll. exe glared dangerously as her virus summons flanked her. "You wanted to show off a new trick... Well I'm not impressed! Program Advance! SuperSpread!"

"No, this isn't me showing off," Hub answered as he barely withstood the attack thanks to the Undershot program. "This is me channeling the power of Gutsman's soul with my own. And while Gutsman isn't the most eloquent, he is right about something..." Hub glared back as he aimed his buster. "Sometimes it's best to just stand your ground and fire away!"

Roll. exe did her best to dodge as Hub began firing rapidly with a dead ringer for the GutBuster, the attacks of her virus summons splashing off a green invincibility aura like those granted by the Trumpy virus. As she was peppered by several shots and her summons slowly shredded, she noticed that the buster only fired in rapid invincible mode for a scant few seconds before the onslaught and protection died down. She charged up her Roll Arrow and timed the protection before shooting.

"Recover300! In and download!" Lan smirked in triumph right before Roll. exe fired and Hub healed many of his wounds before Roll. exe's shot hit.

"Argh!" Mayl fumed. "Okay, let's finish this Roll! Sword! WideSword! LongSword!"

"Well, if you insist," Lan smirked. "Sword! WideSword! LongSword!"

"Program Advance!" Hub and Roll. exe yelled together as they charged each other and swung. "LifeSword!"

The two program advance blades clashed and locked together as the navis pushed against each other. Hub in GutsSoul braced against the ground and Roll. exe's airshoes blasting in overdrive to keep her in place.

"Still think I'm not taking you seriously?" Hub stared into Roll. exe's eyes through the crossed blades. "You have a kind and gentle power, Roll. You love and care for everyone, including your opponents, no matter how terrible they're being. It's a power I've only faced once before," Hub's voice dropped low, to where the only ones outside Roll. exe herself who could hear him were their operators Lan and Mayl, as he brought out a pristine emblem bearing the number '1'. "When I earned this. The rank of the king of the undernet."

Deep in the undernet, the former king Serenade. exe smiled serenely as she watched the match her subordinates had been kind enough to arrange viewing of. She couldn't hear what was being said, and she doubted most would be able to catch the tiny trinket being flashed, but she did. And she knew exactly what it meant.

"Well now, it seems this just got interesting."

Roll. exe stared back into Hub's eyes and understanding flashed through her. He wasn't treating her like an opponent who had to be brought down no matter what, he was treating her like the strongest of rivals.

"So as the king of the undernet, I'm hereby making this a rank challenge. You win, and you become the new king."

"Don't you mean queen?" Roll. exe whispered back.

"Nope," Hub chuckled softly as the LifeSwords began to lose cohesion despite never finishing their attack sequence. "The last king was a girl too."

Any further conversation was cut off as they both jumped back from each other and got ready. Roll. exe shot another arrow, only to have a Curse shield pop up in front of her target as his DoubleSoul ran out that jumped at her right after being hit.

Hub and Roll. exe stared each other down, knowing that the next move might very well be the last one. As they did, Hub felt the resonance of souls. The power born of mutual respect, admiration, and in this case... perhaps something more.

"Let's finish this, Roll! Double, Triple, Quad Needles in and download!"

Mayl and Roll. exe moved as one and took aim at their opponents. "Program Advance! Arrows!"

"Invisible!" Lan and Hub yelled together as Hub vanished, the program advance missing him completely. "And VariableSword! Sonic Wave Technique!"

Roll. exe attempted to warp to the side, but the wave was large enough to clip her anyway, and the two that came after it finished her. She found herself back in Mayl's PET the next moment.

"Roll... deleted! The winner of the Hawk tournament! Lan and Megaman!"

Lan smiled and waved as he was presented with the Hawk trophy, idly recognizing the presenter from the DenCity tournament, but his mind was preoccupied waiting for the other shoe he knew was about to drop.

And he wasn't disappointed. Beneath the tumultuous cheers, a sinister laugh began building. As it grew louder, more and more of the spectators grew silent in confusion.

"What... what is this?" Mami the announcer spoke into her microphone out of habit.

"So Megaman..." a deep dark voice echoed over the castle. "You thought you would emerge the victor today..."

"Lan...?" Mayl asked in worry from her spot off to the side, having been recognized as the runner-up right before Lan was presented with the trophy.

"I'm not sure," Lan told her, *'but I've got a good idea,'* he added silently. "Who are you? Show yourself!"

"I? I am the leader of the DarkChip syndicate Nebula. I am here to collect the power that destroyed Shademan."

There was a sudden sound as part of the floor slid away and the tournament's battlecomp came ratcheting up into position.

"The... the battlecomp!" Mami shrieked. "It's...!"

"Lan and Megaman, you will jack into the battlecomp now, or else no one will leave this stadium alive..."

"Alright Nebula!" Lan yelled. "Here we come!"

"We're coming too, Lan!" Mayl yelled as she joined Lan at the battlecomp. "Jack in! Roll!"

"Megaman!"

"Execute!" they both finished together.

Hub and Roll. exe appeared in the battlecomp and looked around to see... an empty cyberscape.

"I don't get it..." Roll. exe puzzled. "It's empty."

"He probably just wants to make a flashy entrance," Hub said, before wincing as a sharp buzz hit his systems.

"Or perhaps you can sense my arrival as your body resonates with my DarkPower," the voice chuckled as a staticy portal opened up and a black-bodied navi with glowing blue lines framing and decorating his form, plus a single eye that pulsed with sinister light appeared. "I am Laserman... the mighty leader from the dark world..."

"Yeah, and what do you want?" Hub took a cautious stance.

"Why you, Megaman... With your power, the power that was able to destroy the mighty Shademan, we can make the dark world complete!"

"Yeah, right!" Roll. exe spat before Hub could respond.

"This does not concern you, little girl," Laserman. exe dismissed. "Only Megaman. It would be a shame to have to delete you."

"I'll never join your evil ranks!" Hub glared angrily.

"Yeah!" Roll. exe added as Laserman. exe began to chuckle again.

"The hate in your eyes is proof of your dark potential! You see us as 'evil', but our cause is just and honorable. It is hypocrites like you that are truly evil!"

"Are you insane?" Mayl asked with an expression of disgust.

"Our goal in Nebula is to completely destroy this worthless hypocritical world and return it to its natural state... as a world of evil!"

"Wait..." Hub blinked as the flip-flop registered. "So... are you saying you're evil or not?"

"Hehehehehe..." Laserman. exe ignored the question. "I can see the darkness within you. So quick to brandish BattleChip weapons... instinctively destroying virus after virus... the joy you take in battling even those you call 'friend'... The bloodthirst that drives you is a DarkSoul!"

"You *are* insane if you think Mega's anything like that!" Roll. exe accused. "You won't get away with this! Come on Mega, let's show this creep what we can do together!"

"Hehehe... How touching..." Laserman. exe didn't seem concerned in the least. "But such devotion provides the perfect opportunity! To show Megaman the power of his DarkSoul!" Laserman. exe raised his hand, in which was set a digital crystal that glowed a sickly green. "The dark strength for which loyalty and friendship is no match!"

The digital crystal glowed brighter and Hub felt a tugging at something deep within him. "Ungh!" he grunted as the pull forced him to his knees.

"Embody DarkSoul!"

"GggnnnnnnnnaaaaaAAARRGGHH!" Hub yelled as a shadowy black mass forced its way out of his body and took on a shape that mirrored his.

"Mega!" Roll. exe rushed to his side as Laserman. exe boomed with laughter. "What did you do to him?!"

"I merely freed his evil power, his DarkSoul, from within."

"R-roll... Watch out..."

"Go DarkSoul! Destroy Megaman using his worthless 'friend'."

"Wha–?" Roll. exe turned just in time to catch a glimpse of the shadowy form before it entered her body.

"Roll!" Hub yelled, getting to his feet.

"M-mega... r-r-run... b-before..."

"Roll?" Hub reached for her, dreading what he already knew had to be happening.

"SuperVulcan!" a darkened Roll. exe cackled with glee as she pumped the shots into Hub from point-blank range.

"Lan!" Mayl yelled in a panic. "I... I can't stop her! She's not responding to anything I do!"

"AirHockey AirHockey AirHockey!" the possessed Roll. exe grinned impossibly wide as she fired off the BattleChips in succession.

"Roll–argh! Get ahold of yourself!"

"It is no use..." Laserman. exe watched with dark glee, content to make no move to aid or hinder either of them. "This is the power of your DarkSoul, stronger than that of your beloved Roll! Fight! Fight the way you were born to and destroy Megaman!"

"I refuse to believe that!" Hub shouted as he blocked a LongSword with a WideSword of his own.

"Believe what you wish... it changes nothing. The DarkSoul's power is absolute!"

"Lan, you have to heal Megaman!" Mayl looked ready to burst into tears at being unable to do anything.

"I've got a better idea," Lan declared as he brandished the Recover300 BattleChip. "We'll fight soul power with soul power! Sacrifice Recover300 for soul unison! Unison Chip in! Download!"

"Double Soul activate!" Hub stood his ground as a form of pink shades with some yellow converged on him before releasing in a

wave of soft light that made it seem like everything would be okay. "ROLLSOUL!"

Mayl's breath hitched as she took in Hub's form. Clad in pink armor like Roll. exe's and sporting a quartet of translucent yellow antenna, he still seemed every inch the warrior. "Is... is that...?"

"It is the conclusion of the great Apollo that pink never looked that badass even in the mortal eras when it was considered a manly color."

"I doubt I could agree with you without someone claiming bias on my part."

"Pathetic..." Laserman. exe scoffed. "A futile gesture."

"Says you!" Hub shot back as he used a pair of AreaGrabs to dodge the possessed Roll. exe's next attacks, and blocking two more with a Sword and LongSword, each use of a chip causing his wounds to heal up until he seemed barely injured at all.

"Die!" the possessed Roll. exe cackled and charged headlong at Hub.

"If it's a bet between my darkness and Roll's light," Hub yelled as he met the charge by catching Roll. exe's hands with his, locking them both in a struggling stalemate, " *I know which one my money's on every time!* "

The two combatants pushed against each other mightily before the maniacal expression on Roll. exe's face began to contort.

"M-m...ega... h-help... me..."

"I'm right here Roll! Fight it! I know you can beat this thing!"

"Impossible..." Laserman. exe's tone and expression were unchanging, but he seemed just the slightest bit surprised.

"Mayl!" Lan called out. "Now's your chance! If you can connect with Roll, then you should be able to force the DarkSoul out!"

"Got it!" Mayl's tears dried as her face took on a determined expression. Focusing, her hands moved almost of their own accord and searched out three BattleChips before slotting them in silence.

"G-g-g-g-g..." Roll. exe's face contorted as the DarkSoul tried to fight back, before a light began to glow within her, brighter and brighter until it erupted in a blinding flash, the only shadow being the DarkSoul as it was forcibly ejected from her body. "GAH!" Roll. exe slumped in exhaustion as the light died down, falling into Hub's arms.

"Roll!" Hub cried out, cradling her protectively. "Are you okay?"

"I... I'm fine Mega..."

"How unfortunate..." Laserman. exe turned to stare at the two and made a gesture with his hand that the DarkSoul responded to.

As the shadowy form of himself rushed towards them, Hub twisted to shield Roll. exe with his body. He felt a coldness pass into him that forced his DoubleSoul to terminate sooner than expected, but at least it didn't try to possess Roll. exe again.

"Truly you can feel it, Megaman?" Laserman. exe prodded, and Hub had to admit he could. The dark sinister urges at the back of his mind, now strong enough that he could feel them pulsing... waiting... wanting... "That is your true self. Do you understand the evil that lies within you? Do you understand that there is no one right or one wrong? Do you understand why I must sever the bond that holds you back?"

Hub froze as that last part registered and turned to see Laserman. exe's eye glowing brighter in a clear intent to attack, and he was staring straight at Roll. exe...

"Not so fast!" a crimson blur flashed in front of Laserman. exe, causing him to flinch and clutch a shallow cut on his face.

"Protoman!" Lan and Hub identified the newcomer with no small amount of relief.

"Sorry we're late," the voice of Chaud came over Protoman. exe's connection, "but I had to send Protoman from the other side of Electopia."

"Hmm..." Laserman. exe straightened back up and considered Protoman. exe for a moment. "It seems it is time for me to take my leave. I look forward to you joining our cause when we next meet..."

"Protoman! Don't let him escape!"

"Roger!" Protoman. exe dashed for the Nebula leader with a flash of his blade as the dark navi was surrounded by a staticy field, but his sword only cut empty space.

"If you continue this foolishness," Laserman. exe's voice echoed with parting words, "then deletion shall be your fate!"

The only response was Chaud's loud swearing.

"That is one nasty piece of work... Are you certain this 'DarkSoul' thing isn't viral?"

Hephaestus sighed heavily. "While I'll freely admit there are similarities with known viral entities, such as whatever is in control of the Malicious Looping Entity known as Waltz, every check I've run indicates the answer is 'no'."

"But you aren't completely sure."

"There is precious little about this branch that I'm completely sure of."

Apollo was thoughtfully silent for several long moments. "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to cash in some blackmail and light a fire under dad's ass regarding getting approval for our petition as soon as divinely possible..."

"Where do you even keep your blackmail stash any..." Hephaestus trailed off as Apollo whipped out a phone and facepalmed as it became obvious. "You stash it all with Artemis, don't you? You know she's serious about that threat, right?"

"Of course, why do you think the sensible Apollo is calling instead of going in person?"

"Do you have something Dr. Regal?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. At least not related to our project. My netnavi was just speaking to me about a personal matter. Do continue Dr. Hikari."

Dr. Regal smiled as the giant laser began to power up. After the few intensive weeks of work, they'd managed to construct the device and calculate the required shot. There was, of course, plenty of cut corners that in ordinary circumstances would have been unforgivable. For one, the systems were only rated for half the needed energy output, meaning that charging up a strong enough laser to get through the atmosphere and overcome the scattering effect superheated air had would likely blow out a great many very sensitive, expensive, and in some cases unique pieces of equipment.

Then there was the fact that (among other things) the day's weather, along with the placement of orbital debris and other celestial bodies, as well as the rotation of the Earth itself, were in the best alignment

that could possibly be hoped for. Even if they could take another shot, they weren't going to get a better one than this.

"We have done all that we could," he stated in response to the others' worries. "Let us hope that our luck holds out. If you would, Dr. Hikari, the laser..."

"Of course, let's proceed" the man said formally. He hadn't warmed up to Dr. Regal during the course of the project, but then his approval wasn't required. Only his industry. "Blue Moon Laser... on! Red Sun guidance systems active. Targeting path set. Power transfer is holding steady. Power at 80% of system tolerance... 95%... 99%... 100%... 110%..."

The platform started shaking as the laser's systems protested the overcharge.

"Shouldn't you fire?" a man who'd clearly not been paying attention at the briefings asked.

"Not yet!" Dr. Hikari called back. "The systems need to be charged to 200% of tolerance before they'll be able to shift the asteroid's path! 150%..."

Dr. Regal tensed as the moment of truth approached.

"170%... 180%... 190%... 200%! Fire!"

Only Dr. Regal heard the chuckling laughter as an intense beam of energy lanced into the heavens and he allowed himself a small smile as he saw Dr. Hikari's expression fall.

"No!" the man slammed his fist into the console.

"What's wrong, Dr. Hikari?" someone asked.

"Right when the laser fired, the energy charge dropped to 120%... We... We failed... Even a direct hit wouldn't shift the asteroid's course and many of the key components were likely still fried..."

"Who would do such a thing?" Dr. Regal asked with plausible incredulity.

"It had to have been a malicious navi, but not many could operate in the Laser's computer while it was channeling so much power. Check everything for possible tampering and assess system damages immediately. We need to see what can be salvaged for another attempt... We're running out of time..."

With that, Dr. Hikari stormed off, leaving a shocked group of scientists.

"I... I can't believe Dr. Hikari's plan failed..." a woman voiced the disbelief of the group. "What... what will happen now?"

"I have a plan," Dr. Regal stated calmly, but with the distinct inflection of one who had just gotten inspiration.

"R-really?" every eye suddenly turned to him, desperate for hope, no matter how crazy or questionable it might seem.

"I will need an expert operator and navi," Dr. Regal relayed calmly, not daring to show the smile he had within as things came together perfectly.

Lan was bored. Really bored. There just wasn't a whole lot to do besides wait in the weeks before he was contacted about entering the Red Sun tournament. Or the Blue Moon tournament. Whichever it was going to end up being.

Apparently, there was supposed to be a surprise match between the winners of the Hawk and Eagle tournaments, which would have been Chaud (who had been sporting a rather impressive bandage on one hand for a few days and had given Lan an odd look when he was asked if he actually punched the rock). However, with Laserman. exe's attack, Chaud had pulled the Official card and shut that down so he could investigate.

At least the fans hadn't been disappointed. They hadn't even known there was anything to cancel.

In any case, he had talked Hub into doing some exploring on the net to see if they found anything interesting. So far it had just been them trying out some of their lesser-used and newer chips on the standard viruses to see what worked for them.

The GunDelSol1 had taken a bit of trial and error to work properly, but wow... Instant destruction of obstacles, no harm to mystery data, and a few seconds of rapid hp drain on anything unfortunate enough to be caught in its beam that made the effect of poison panels look like a case of the cybersniffles. And it only got stronger if Lan held the PET in sunlight.

That chip was going into their main folder after this.

"Psst! Hey, bud!" a low voice hissed at Hub from the shadows of an off-the-beat path.

"What?" Hub questioned.

"Was that a GunDelSol1?" a fairly standard HeelNavi peeked out.

"Um... yes...?" Hub hesitated.

"Awesome! I've been looking for one of those! What'll you trade it for?"

"Nothing," Hub and Lan stated together.

The HeelNavi blinked and stared at them calculatingly. "Then what about betting it? A competition. Your GunDelSol1 against the GunDelSol2 I found in the undernet."

Hub blinked. "Why in the world would you bet a stronger chip?"

"Because I hear that if you use all three versions at once, something amazing happens," the HeelNavi grinned in challenge. "And I'm a big

fan of the series. So I propose that the bigger fan wins both chips, you in?"

"Lan?" Hub questioned.

"...Oh, why not?" Lan replied after a moment.

"Okay then, on three hold up the chip and shout it out with all your soul!"

"Shout wha–"

"If you're a real fan, then you should know! Ready? One... Two..."

"TAIYOHHHHHH!" Lan and Hub yelled together, focusing all of their love for the series into that one word as the latter raised the GunDelSol1 to the digital sky.

The cry died down to its own echoes across the cyberscape and Hub looked to see the HeelNavi staring at him in slack amazement, his own GunDelSol2 barely held in limp fingers.

"Um... aren't you going to go too?"

"No..." the HeelNavi shook his head and held the chip manifestation out. "No need. You... you're true fans... You deserve to have this... Take it. May you keep the Sun always in your heart."

"Thank you," Hub bowed as he accepted the data. "I will. For the Sun shall rise tomorrow."

Hephaestus blinked as he watched Apollo press a key on his portable terminal. "What are you doing?"

"The brilliant Apollo is using his patented sneeze button!"

"Your wha... You just made Django sneeze in response to that scene, didn't you?"

"I'm Ozuma, director of this attraction's theme 'Django the Solar Boy'. How do you like this Vampire Manor? Impressive, wouldn't you say?"

"It really is," Lan smiled.

"Yeah, we're big fans of the series," Hub agreed.

"Really now?" Ozuma mused as he considered them. "Hmm... I wonder just how big... You know the NumberTrader at Higsby's I assume?"

"Well, yeah..." Lan blinked, not sure what to make of the sudden subject change. He'd found a few nifty lottery codes around and gotten some useful stuff. Nice to have, but hardly earth-shattering.

"Then listen close," Ozuma motioned Lan to lean in. "I made a special version of the GunDelSol BattleChip available only through Higsby's NumberTrader, but only true fans of the series can figure out the lotto hint. Are you ready?"

Not sure what to make of this, Lan nodded.

"Okay, then. In order, how many petals does Master Otenko have? How many snakes are on Carmilla's head? How many dungeons are in Istorakan? How many silver coins are there in total? And finally, how many floors in the Azure Sky Tower? Answer those and the special GunDelSol version is yours! Now the question is, can you find the answers?"

"Okay, Lan..." Hub focused as they crouched over the NumberTrader. "Master Otenko has seven petals. Four snakes grow out of Carmelita's head."

"Yeah, those are the easy ones," Lan muttered as he punched in the first two numbers. "The number of dungeons is hard though... Twenty nine!"

"I kind of thought it was funny that you had to list them all from memory to figure that out," Hub smirked as Lan punched in the next two numbers. "And there's a total of thirty silver coins."

"Yeah, and what a pain they were to track down..." Lan replied as he punched in the next two numbers. "And Sky Tower!"

"Ninety nine floors of pure frustration," Hub nodded as Lan put the last two numbers in and they both crossed their fingers as the machine analyzed the number for several nerve-wracking seconds before beeping cheerfully and dispensing the BattleChip they'd come for.

GunDelSol EX, a mega-class version of the GunDelSol chip series.

"Holy..." Lan's eyes widened.

"Oh, yeah," Hub grinned. "We will have some fun with this."

"Megaman, isn't it? I represent the World NetBattle Association. We are about to hold a world-class tournament in Netopia, and as the winner of Electopia's Hawk tournament we are hereby inviting you to compete in the Blue Moon tournament. We would be honored if you would take part."

Lan groaned as he came to and looked around. He was... in a hotel room? Why was he in a...

"Lan, you're awake!" Hub exclaimed in relief from Lan's PET.

"Hub...? What happened...?"

"That guy just came up and sprayed you with some sort of knockout gas and then hauled us both here. I'm just glad they forgot to separate us."

"Knockout gas...?" Lan puzzled over that as his head began to clear a bit.

"Hey kid! Time for you to take a nap!"

"...Hub, I really hope our future memories are right and this is just the Blue Moon prelims being unnervingly realistic. Otherwise, we're in big trouble."

"Well, in either case, let's assume that you can jack me in somewhere so I can unlock the door."

"Right," Lan nodded firmly. "Let's get going!"

Chaud gazed levelly at the two men across from him, one of them holding an icepack over a black eye.

"Okay, I'm here and I'm listening. Now *what* was that all about?"

"My sincerest apologies, Mr. Chaud," the man who had introduced himself as Mr. Bonds apologized. "I am the one who set this examination up. The idea was to stage a kidnapping where you would be forced to use your NetBattling skills to escape captivity so we could make sure you were indeed a world-class NetBattler."

"So this is about the Blue Moon tournament," Protoman. exe spoke up from Chaud's PET.

"I'm more interested in who thought this was a good idea," Chaud's eyes narrowed. "You may have set up the prelim, Mr. Bonds, but I doubt you're actually the tournament organizer."

"True..." Mr. Bonds sighed. "We were told to test how each potential contestant performed under stress and to make it seem as if they were in real jeopardy. There were protests, of course, but..."

"But orders are orders," Protoman. exe finished.

"Yeah..." Mr. Bonds sighed again. "You're not even the first to defend themselves against the initial assault. James here is the second 'assailant' I've had to employ today after a wild card entry named Jack Bomber kicked the first one in the groin." (38)

Chaud winced in sympathetic reflex.

"And the entrant from Yumland... We never even saw him. Still haven't. His navi just showed up, registered, and left."

"Are you sure it's not an independent navi?"

Mr. Bonds blinked. "It *shouldn't* be..."

"Hi, I'm Paulie. You Lan?"

"The best virus buster in your village? Wow, you must be pretty amazing."

"I like you Lan. We have a few days before our match, so I would like to take you to see my village's water festival."

Despite his interest, Lan had wondered how in the world a kid younger than him could so casually afford to fly off during the tournament, but it seemed that some of the sponsors were taking the time before the tournament as an opportunity to do backgrounds on several contestants and they were eating the whole thing up. (39)

Though he was getting a little tired of being followed by a guy with a camera, even if he was promised the right to veto any footage involving him from the final cut.

Another thing he was wondering was how accurate his future memories of Paulie almost wiping his entire village out as a ploy to then 'save' it and become recognized were. Sure, he could be just playing friendly so he could show off in front of his upcoming opponent, but Lan also remembered the kid having a HeelNavi, and

Jammer's orange and gray form was very clearly an OfficialNavi, the standard navi type developed for police work and typically used in positions of authority.

Of course, that was a question for tomorrow when the Water Festival started. For now, Lan was just relaxing and enjoying the chance to explore another country. He actually wasn't sure if he'd gotten the chance to the first time around or not (assuming he'd actually faced Paulie of course), so it was a pretty cool experience.

"Well, if it isn't Lan!" a cheerful voice called out.

"Mr. Famous?" Lan blinked as he spotted the eccentric navi expert approaching in the bright NetFrica sun. Despite the heat, he was apparently wearing kendo equipment under his open white labcoat and seemed not the least bit uncomfortable. "What are you doing in NetFrica?"

"I've been traveling all over the world since I got back from my vacation, training top-class NetBattlers!" Mr. Famous grinned, his words prompting Lan to think about the last time they'd met and the friendly match Hub had had with a rather intense navi named Punk.exe.

"Speaking of training, how did Punk turn out?"

"Just fine," Mr. Famous smiled. "He was never meant for me though. He's being operated by one of my top students now in fact. I'm operating Kendoman currently since he's my best navi trainer."

"Kendoman, huh?" Lan mused. "Isn't he one of the Blue Moon contestants?"

"Yep!" the man grinned. "The people of NetFrica have liked me so much that when the tournament recruiters came around, they asked me to enter! Sure, it'll take time away from training new apprentices, but I just couldn't say no!"

"Heh... I'd really like to meet Kendoman, even though we'll probably be facing each other in the next round," Lan started, before trailing off as something occurred to him.

"Well, if you have time you can talk to the local youth organization representative in order to find him. Just don't get Kendoman mad! He can be a scary navi when he wants to be!"

"Say, Famous?" Lan interrupted. "Have any of your apprentices ever been... a problem? Someone you had to dismiss who might think the tournament is a good time to maybe get revenge?"

"Hmm..." Mr. Famous stared at Lan thoughtfully for several moments. "I've had to dismiss several apprentices over the years. Most because they couldn't handle the more intense training of the higher levels, and some were quite bitter about it. But there was one person... One apprentice who had great potential but that I had to dismiss because he grew arrogant. I had to place a program seal on his navi disabling everything he'd developed training under me. He left swearing that he'd make me sorry, but I haven't heard from him since... Hmm..."

"Wow... ouch," Lan winced. "What kind of seal?"

"A rather ingenious one of my own design," Mr. Famous smirked. "Embedded into the personal data of his PET rather than the navi. So long as he transfers his personal information like everyone else, the seal will persist even if he switches navis or PETs. The only way to undo the seal is with a display of genuine empathy, transmitted through the link between human and netnavi. At least that's how I designed it."

"That's pretty cool," Lan complimented the man, "but I've learned enough to know that people who obsess over something often find a way around any obstacles, and not always moral ones... Anyway, it was nice meeting you again! Hope to see you in the semifinals!"

Mr. Famous waved cheerfully as Lan sped off. His grin then morphed into a serious expression as he considered the Hikari boy's words. They seemed innocuous enough, but...

"If you went back in time and got to do events over again... and ultimately things turned out pretty well the first time around... would it still be right to try and change things for the better?"

"Curious..." he stroked his chin. It was patently impossible, but yet... Well, if the boy's experiences with the likes of the WWW, Gospel, Cache, and from the rumors he'd heard, Nebula were anything to go by, then the boy seemed drawn to such things. And forewarned was forearmed as so many said.

Idly twisting a knob for a custom feature on his PET, Mr. Famous began to send a message to one of his apprentices.

"Hey sensei!" the mohawked youth greeted. "What's up?"

"How fast can you and the others get to NetFrica?" he asked.

"NetFrica?" the youth blinked. "Wow, that's gonna need more coinage than the NetNavi Killers can really spare boss man."

"You know I hate that name," Mr. Famous frowned. "Why can't you just call yourselves the Elite Four like I suggested?"

"Because it sounds like something a bunch of kids playing around with fantasy monsters would use," the youth rolled his eyes. "Plus Takeshi accepted an invite we all got to some Red Sun thing, so we're down to three. It'll still be a pretty penny out of our fund to pack up and come." (40)

"Maybe not," Mr. Famous smiled. "I've qualified for a Blue Moon tournament myself and the sponsors have been hounding me for something to give the public before the tournament starts, with particular interest in the NetBattlers I've been training. They've

offered to pay for travel and lodging expenses to bring a few in, so I think it's time I should take them up on it."

"Protecting the world from devastation and uniting peoples in every nation! Spreading the message of brotherly love and extending that truth to the stars above! They are... Team Famous!"

"Oh, you like to watch Jessie and James too?"

"Why, yes, the mighty Apollo does. The mighty Apollo was not aware you did."

"They build some rather ingenious things for mortals."

Chaud frowned to himself. Chillski and Coldman. exe had given up on cooling the arena way too easily. After all the trouble they'd gone through to corrupt the environment control systems to blast the air conditioning way beyond what it was meant for, it seemed very suspicious.

And then there was what he'd said about going back to Sharo and returning with 'natural cold'.

"Protoman, what information is there about Sharo?"

"The largest land area of any nation on the planet, much of Sharo lies in the northern regions of the world, near the Arctic, making it a very cold country in most areas. The growing season in many areas is shorter than average as a result, making food a primary concern for them even though the nation as a whole is more sparsely populated than the global average. They have excellent military and science programs though, rivaling those of even Netopia or Electopia. A year ago, they unveiled their new weather control system meant to aid their farmers. They also–"

"That weather control system you mentioned," Chaud asked, getting a sinking feeling, "how powerful is it?"

"Not enough to grant total atmospheric control, but it can easily influence warm and cold fronts to... Ah, I see, Lord Chaud. That is what they meant by 'returning with natural cold'."

"Most likely," Chaud sighed. It looked like they were going to have to go to Sharo to stop Chillski from doing something very stupid. *'It's funny... This is precisely the kind of thing I'd expect Lan to land in the middle of...'*

Chaud then looked at a quartet of BattleChips in his hand.

"Hey Chaud! Nice seeing you here! Hey, I saw you were facing off against some operator and navi from Sharo named Chillski and Coldman, so I thought you could use these!"

The chips were a HeatShot, a FlameLine, a HeatBreath, and a BlackBomb. All fire-element, which had no inherent advantage over the aqua-element Coldman. exe.

"Why are you giving me these?"

"So you can warm yourself up of course!"

Lan had laughed about it, but it was still strange. The selection seemed random, but Chaud was good at reading people and he was *certain* Lan hadn't actually picked out four random fire chips from his collection just for a joke.

"What do you mean he never checked in?" the reporter asked the hotel attendant. "He was one of the first to finish registering for the tournament and we know they're all staying here!"

"I don't know what to tell you," the receptionist sweatdropped. "All I have is a room reserved under the initial 'J', but no one ever showed

up to claim it..."

Lan had been relaxing in the village in preparation for the beginning of the Water Festival tomorrow, and had seen the introductions for the Blue Moon competitors being broadcast to the world. He was a bit surprised to see that Princess Pride of Creamland was Mr. Famous's upcoming opponent since he'd mostly skimmed the board to see who his opponent would be and find out who would be facing Chillski so he could prepare them. That it had been Chaud actually set his mind at ease.

"But the Blue Moon tournament isn't the only big event going on!" the newscaster declared, turning to his female partner. (41)

"That's right, there's the Red Sun tournament also being held and we'll be covering both in the upcoming weeks! But first, here's a look as the competitors in the Red Sun tournament!"

Lan had done a double-take when he'd heard the words 'Red Sun' and his attention was riveted on the screen. When he saw the first competitor, nothing short of a full Nebula invasion could have pulled his attention away.

"Hub..." Lan made sure his PET had a good view of the television, "is that who I think it is?"

"I... I think it is... Wow..."

"Um... refresh the mighty Apollo's memory... *Who* is this the mighty Lan and Megaman are recognizing and why do they seem to think they're a big deal?"

"Ah, but that'd be telling!" Hephaestus smirked.

Jack Bomber sweated nervously as the opponent they'd challenged to a game of FootBomb effortlessly stopped his navi's shot. And how could he not? He was almost as big as the freaking goal!

"You recall our agreement, correct?" the monstrous navi intoned with a voice not unlike grinding metal.

"Y-yeah..." Jack gulped. If he and his navi lost without scoring a single goal, then... then they had to withdraw from the tournament. Withdraw and give up their only chance of making the glorious sport of FootBomb bigger than this whole 'netbattling' and 'virus busting' fad.

After that initial shock, Lan had vowed to pay close attention to how the Red Sun tournament developed. As the list of competitors grew, that vow only strengthened.

He recognized Raoul and Thunderman. exe from Netopia readily, as well as Raika and Searchman. exe from Sharo despite technically not having met them yet. The same went for Dingo and Tomahawkman. exe from the remote island of Jawaii.

The ruler of Yumland and his elite navi Cookman. exe had been a surprise, and Lan again gave thanks that the Yumland navis lost in Shadowman. exe's attack under Gospel's orders had been successfully restored from backups.

Then there was the man whose name he couldn't pronounce who dressed in white desert robes. What alarmed Lan about the guy was that he apparently operated Pharaohman. exe. Lan hadn't realized the mysterious navi even *had* an operator.

Of course, that confusion paled in comparison to 'Soul Battler' Takeshi's navi. The guy's navi was... well, it looked almost exactly like Hub, save for the green color. Though the blue-tinted shades did kind of hide the face, so he might not look *exactly* like Hub. The way all of his chips manifested red was an interesting little piece of

customization too. Yes, Quint. exe was an intriguing navi to learn of. (42)

"And then there's the last contestant of Red Sun, who claims to hail from the 'Lost Civilization of Mu'."

'The what?' Lan scrunched his face up in puzzlement.

"Is she serious?" the newscaster's partner asked incredulously.

"She certainly seems to be, but whatever the case Sherrice and her navi Rideman are world-class battlers."

Lan almost choked on the water he'd been drinking.

"I guess it just goes to show that it takes all types, doesn't it?"

"Lan..." Hub asked, "do you really think they're from a lost civilization?"

Lan finished coughing before he replied. "Honestly, Hub, those memories of an ancient super-virus seem more like the kind of fever dreams we got the last time Dex made pizza."

"That was a long night," Hub nodded. "You kept knocking me out of my rest cycle moaning about how the pink elephants were on parade. Did you all really have to eat that much?"

"But it was so *good!* "

"Jack Bomber!" the lady from NAXA announced to the crowd as the man in question smirked to himself.

'Hehehe... That fool thinks we'd honor a cheater's bet? Thinks he can show us up at our noble sport and then laugh at us? Well, the joke's on him! Because he thinks he doesn't have to show up now, which means we'll win by default!'

"And the representative from Yumland... J–"

"I see you are as honest as you are brave and skilled," a grating metal voice came from the state-of-the-art battlecomp. The holographic emitters came online and displayed a massive navi composed of mismatched metal parts, red cables from his head that mimicked hair, and a pair of glowing yellow eyes that shone from the shadowed recesses of his head. "That is to say, not at all. Come. Jack your pathetic little navi in so that I may remake him into the junk he truly is!"

"Where is your NetOp?" the announcer asked.

"I have no need of one. I am the solo navi Junkman and I shall crush all before me!"

"Knightman... Deleted! The winner is Mr. Famous and Kendoman!"

Princess Pride stared at the duo as they bowed in unison. They even held their blades identically!

"What... what in the world? How did you manage to do that?"

"Ah, you like it?" Mr. Famous grinned as he held up his training sword. Opening his hand, it became clear that set into the hilt was a custom-model PET. "It's a little something I developed for when I'm operating Kendoman. With it, I can operate solely by movement, making synchronization between navi and NetOp that much easier."

"That's..." Princess Pride swallowed her namesake and forced herself to admit the truth. "That's brilliant... I... I can see where you get your reputation from..."

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*"*Whoosh* Protoman! What is the idea of meddling in our business?!"*

"Ex cuse *me? Your 'business' created a blizzard over half the northern hemisphere!"*

"Exactly! I just starting to cool off! We make you pay for this! When we face you in colosseum we freeze Protoman to core!"

Chaud ignored the cameraman following him (allowed to tag along so that there was video record of any illegal acts on Chillski's part, an assumption that was paying off big) as he went back to the Sharo Space Center. Chillski was little more than a self-centered brat wearing an adult's body, and his navi wasn't any better.

What concerned him was Lan. Those four fire chips had been exactly what was needed to reboot the heating systems. This was far more than mere luck. Lan had *known* . How he'd known was completely unclear, but he'd still known. There was no other explanation that made sense.

But it would have to wait. He needed to check on the scientist and get back to Netopia for his match.

"Thank you so much for fixing our systems! I apologize for not telling you where we kept our supply of the needed chips, but I see you managed to find them anyway."

Chaud blinked. Of *course* they'd have a ready supply on hand in case something happened. So why did Lan know one, but not the other? It bore looking into.

"Actually, a... friend of mine gave me some fire chips as a joke when he heard I was facing Coldman so I had them on hand already."

"Really now?" the scientist seemed pleasantly surprised. "How fortunate! But let me replace them before you leave."

"I don't need–"

"Nonsense! It's the very least we can do!"

"Actually, if you really want to thank me, then..."

The scientist listened as Chaud told him what he wanted.

"You are a very cruel kid, you know that?"

"I just have a very low tolerance for crooks."

"Very well. I can't promise anything, but I'll make the necessary calls. And I'm still going to insist on replacing those chips!"

Lan hoped Chaud was doing okay. There had been reports of a massive blizzard that had started in Sharo and was headed for Netopia. Of course, they weren't really able to help repair a closed system from NetFrica, so they'd gone ahead and participated in the Water God quest.

"That's the Water God? A designer water management system for the river?"

"Haha! Indeed it is! But the idea of the Water God is an ancient one for our village, and even though we enjoy many modern comforts we like to honor our ancestors by keeping up our traditions. And so when the system was installed, our village consecrated it as the new home for our ancient water god and we have never once regretted it. The water festival has always been our most sacred celebration, and even if you doubt our god, believe that we'd never want to give up a reason to hold a party!"

"Heh... Yeah, I can get behind that!"

"Would you care to take part in the Water God quest? Most visitors prefer simply to watch, but others seem to enjoy the challenge, plus I've always believed that it does our people good to see the strength and ability of those from other parts of the world."

"I'm not sure... I mean, I'm here on Paulie's invite and I think he wanted to show off before our match..."

"Hmm... yes... Paulie. Paulie has perhaps the most potential of all who live in the village, and he is very talented even at such a young age. But he most of all needs to see that there is strength greater than his out in the world. If you wish to do something for Paulie's sake, I suggest you take part in the quest."

"...Okay, we'll do it!"

Things had gone off as they'd expected, with the launch of a digital totem of the Water God, and a few things that Lan hadn't quite picked up on in his future memories clicked disturbingly into place.

"Last year it flew clear to Sharo's part of the net, but there's no way it'll end up there again!"

It had, and the only one besides Lan and Hub who'd even thought to go search it were Paulie and Jammer. They'd made a beeline for it like they knew it would be there.

And then... right after Lan and Hub returned with it, the Water God totem having been right where they recalled it would be, the river had started drying up and the villagers began to panic. It had happened too fast. There was no way Paulie could have snuck off to infect the Water God. Lan hoped it meant the boy wasn't responsible, but...

"The Water God's system is an endless labyrinth from which few ever return!"

"What about this year's champion? We should send him."

Lan may have missed it in his memories, but he caught the accusing look on Paulie's face even if everyone else was too panicked to notice. The kid had set everything up ahead of time. He hadn't ever

had a chance to prove himself the hero, so he'd gone and invented one. It was enough to make Lan ill.

"Lan..." Hub asked as they watched the angry residue of abandoned navis (or were they just another trap to test people?) dissipate, "what are we going to do about Paulie?"

"I... I don't know, Hub. I mean, yeah he did something that could really hurt his village, but he's also just a kid doing something stupid and reckless. Were we all that different at his age?"

"Hey, don't lump me in with you!"

Coldman. exe recoiled as Protoman. exe slashed his ice blocks right back at him.

"Ow*whoosh*!" That's not fair!"

"You're one to talk!" Chaud spat as he wiped snow from his face and glared at the man who refused to remove his thick winter coat, insisting that the weather suit his preferences instead of simply adjusting to the local conditions. The blizzard Chillski had triggered was still in the process of dissipating this far from Sharo, but someone on the tournament staff had insisted on holding the match anyway. There were vendors outside making an absolute killing selling warm coats to the spectators that were bound and determined to watch regardless of the conditions.

"Hmph! Coldman! Lower the temperature! Freeze Protoman to core!"

"Actually, I was just thinking it was time to warm things up!" Chaud smirked as he fingered a few chips. "BlackBomb Battlechip in! Download!"

Coldman gave a whooshing laugh. "Foolish boy! I am ice navi! I shall never make bomb go off!"

"Maybe you won't," Chaud smirked as Protoman dodged around the blasts of cold their opponent was sending even as the sky began to clear, "but we will. Heatshot!"

The area around Coldman blossomed in a massive fireball as the fire weapon ignited the bomb and it took a few moments for the dust to clear before everyone could see that the ice navi was still standing. By that time, the blizzard was subsiding and the weather was beginning to warm up back to where it should be, many spectators gratefully removing their coats as it did.

"You think we fall to fire? We show you what cold really is!"

"Protoman? HawkCut."

The sword-wielding navi dashed right into Coldman. exe's face and slashed once wide and once long, forcing his opponent to log out from critical damage.

"Coldman... deleted! Chaud and Protoman have clinched the match amid the fierce blizzard and the sun shines once more upon the victors!"

"Bah! It too hot!" Chillski complained from where he was once again refusing to remove his winter layers despite them being wholly inappropriate. "I can not battle in such heat! Dat was unfair match!"

"Are you serious?" Chaud glared dangerously. "You hijack the weather for your own selfish purposes and then have the gall to call *me* unfair?"

"Bah! You kids can never control your temper! Is just stupid game anyway!"

Chaud was torn. On the one hand, part of him wanted to gape at the total and complete hypocrisy he was hearing. On the other, part of him wanted to choke the arrogant man with his own coat until Chillski

either stopped breathing or someone actually managed to pull him off.

"Say that again and there is no power in the world that will save you from me," Chaud settled for twitching and growling his threat out dangerously. "You care nothing for anyone, saying and doing anything to suit yourself! But it's over Chillski!"

"What you think you can do to me?"

"Oh, he won't need to waste his strength on the likes of you," a man in an official uniform strode up to the battlecomp. "The international officials are taking you into custody for your crimes."

"What?!" Chillski seemed genuinely shocked.

"Chillski, you are under arrest for hijacking Sharo's weather satellite and using it to perform an act of international terrorism."

"No...! You can not do this to me!"

"We most certainly can," the man stepped forward to cuff Chillski. A brief scuffle ensued where Chillski attempted to use his larger size to overpower the man and escape, but he was quickly subdued. "Add resisting arrest to your list of charges..." the man grunted as he hauled Chillski to his feet. "You have a lot of explaining to do before your pending trial."

"At least let me do it in cold place!" Chillski pleaded.

"About that," the InterOff member smirked darkly. "The nation of Sharo has agreed to expatriate you to NetFrica for holding and trial. We have a nice cell already waiting for you."

Chillski's face was a mask of pure horror. "N-n-netFrica?! I cannot stand such a hot place! You cannot do this to me! Noooooo!"

Chaud could only smile in triumph as the whining man was roughly dragged out of the colosseum.

Paulie fumed as he stormed towards the colosseum for his match against Lan.

Lan... he'd ruined everything! The quest, the Water God, the viruses Paulie had planted that no one but himself and Jammer should have been able to handle. If he'd only... If he'd just...

"ARGH! I'll get you for this Lan!"

"Well, now, that's a good attitude to have," a voice like a creepy used car salesman spoke up from nearby. Paulie whipped around to spot a weedy-looking character walking out of a shadowed alcove. "A very good attitude, kiddo. In fact, I've got a present for you..."

"I'm *not* a kid," Paulie clenched his fists as the man took out a battlechip from his pocket. A purple-colored battlechip that shadows seemed to cling to.

"Ah, my mistake," the man corrected readily. "And with this very special DarkChip, no one will ever call you a kid again!"

"I don't need it..." Paulie declared, but not as firmly as he'd meant to.

"I'm not saying you do *sir* , but this thing here? This is the difference between beating your opponent and *crushing* your opponent."

"Ouch," Apollo winced as Paulie reached out and took the chip. "Bad move, kid."

"I hate you Lan!" Paulie shouted as Hub and the boy's OfficialNavi Jammer crossed cyberswords in the battlecomp. "Do you even realize what you did? You cost me my only chance to be recognized by my village! But once we beat you, they'll have to recognize us!"

"I thought something was up," Lan stared back at Paulie as Hub countered every move Jammer made. "You tampered with the totem on the Water God quest so it would go to the one area of the net that no one else would search. And you tampered with the Water God itself so you could be the hero and save the village from certain doom."

"Yes! And once I was the village savior, they would stop treating me like a kid! It doesn't matter to them how good Jammer and I are, that we're the best for miles around, they still treat me like a kid!"

"You *are* a kid, Paulie!" Lan shouted back. "Heck, *I'm* a kid! I'm still in grade school and you've just barely started! There's still a whole heck of a lot neither of us understand about the world, but that's okay!"

"You're just like the adults," Paulie glared and pulled out a battlechip that made Lan's breath hitch. There was only one kind of chip that looked like that... "And I'm through listening to you! DarkC–"

"Don't you *dare* ."

The command was delivered in stereo from both Lan and Hub, and so forcefully that Paulie froze in place. Heck, Jammer froze in place as well.

"Paulie, if you use that thing, I swear that we will *never* respect you. Not as an opponent, not as a NetBattler, and not as a person."

"But... you have no idea what–"

"We know exactly what that is, Paulie. It's a DarkChip. It corrodes the spirit of any navi who uses it until they're dragged into the deepest depths of darkness, never to return. It's nothing but pure concentrated evil. We should know, we were forced to use one once to protect a very dear friend of ours, and we're *still* paying the price. We'll probably be paying the price for a very long time. Doing it now, for nothing more than your injured pride? That's a one-way ticket. It'll

get into your head, your heart, your soul. It'll corrode Jammer until there's nothing left of your friend but blackness and rage. Is that what you want for him? To hurt him like that?"

"I..." Paulie looked hurt and terrified, but he wasn't using the chip. "No... I don't want to do that to him... Jammer... I'm sorry... I..."

"It's okay Paulie," Jammer replied. "I'm here for you, just like I promised. Until the end."

"Lan... please... I can't... Take this thing from me...?"

Lan walked slowly over to where Paulie was standing frozen in place and plucked the DarkChip from his fingers. The change was instant. All of the tension in Paulie's body evaporated and he nearly collapsed.

"Thanks... Lan..."

"Anytime. Now... let's finish this properly, eh?"

"Another victory for the generous Lan and Megaman!" Apollo proclaimed as Lan talked the village leader into pardoning Paulie for what he'd done and giving the boy a second chance. Including a second chance to do the Water God quest since the first had been tampered with.

"Indeed," Hephaestus nodded absently as he poked at a few things. A couple of odd changes had cropped up in odd places, like that Paulie boy being tempted with a DarkChip. So far they seemed rather innocuous, but it was more proof that things weren't necessarily going according to baseline at this point.

"–decisively defeated 'Soul Battler' Takeshi and his navi Quint, apprentices of the world-famous Mr. Famous," the reporter finished.

"Indeed they did. What a match! I expect that navi and operator pair may just make it all the way!"

Lan and Hub cheered from where they were watching the coverage of Red Sun in their hotel room, a slew of school assignments they needed to finish to stay with their class strewn about in various stages of completion.

"As would be expected of Netopia's favored duo, but they're going to have stiff competition from their Sharo counterparts, Raika and Searchman! The duo from Sharo's net military are also highly favored to win, particularly after their amazing victory over," Lan did his best to listen to the name, but it sounded like just as much gibberish as it always did, "and his navi Pharaohman."

A replay of Searchman. exe shooting Pharaohman. exe with his Search Scope was seen briefly.

"Ah, but before that happens, they'll each have to get through one of the other semifinalists, and those two are no pushovers!"

"Indeed," the first reporter replied as a scene of Rideman. exe taking out Tomahawkman. exe with a chain attack played. "Raika and Searchman will face off against the incredible dark horse duo of Sherrice and Rideman." The scene switched to show Thunderman. exe obliterating Cookman. exe with a bolt from the cybersky. "While the Netopian tribal powerhouses Raoul and Thunderman will be–"

The television was suddenly drowned out by loud knocks from the door.

"Who in the world could that be?" Lan blinked as he got up to check. Opening the door slightly, he wasn't quite prepared for whoever was on the other side to burst through, put him in a headlock, and start giving him a noogie.

"Aw yeah!" Dex yelled as Lan did his best to extract himself from the humiliating grip of the larger boy. "Who's awesome? *You're*

awesome!"

"Hey Lan!" Mayl greeted cheerfully as she stepped around both boys into the room. "I don't believe it! Are you actually doing your homework?"

"Lan's doing homework? Willingly?" Yai's voice piped up as the smaller girl suddenly zoomed inside. "Quick! Get a news crew! This may be the story of the century!"

"Oh, come on!" Lan complained as he finally got away from Dex. "I'm not *that* bad!"

"Yes you are," all three of his friends nodded together.

"Yeah, yer worse than Dex sometimes! Yeehaw!" Gutsman. exe's voice joined in.

" *Gutsman!* "

"What are you guys even doing here?"

"We came to see you compete, duh!" Yai rolled her eyes. "After all, with my private jet, Netopia's practically around the corner!"

"Yeah, Ms. Mari gave us all the same assignments she gave you, so we can stay for the whole tournament!"

"Pity you weren't here the last few days though," Roll. exe added. "Something about visiting the home of another contestant?"

"What's wrong?" Hephaestus asked as he spotted Apollo looking at the gathering of friends thoughtfully.

"The mighty Apollo is trying to decide if the party at the mighty Lan's has too few people or too many."

"If you do *anything* to influence Mayl to stay the night unsupervised, I *will* tell Artemis."

"Would the great Apollo do something like that?"

"In a heartbeat."

Chaud blinked as he read the e-mail he'd gotten. "We're being asked to help clean up junk data in Yumland's net?"

"It seems that way, Lord Chaud. Apparently it's becoming quite the problem in certain areas."

"I don't doubt the claim, but... why us?"

"I do not know, Lord Chaud, I..." Protoman. exe cut off suddenly.

"Protoman?"

"Apologies, Lord Chaud, but I had the strangest sensation we were being watched for a moment. As I was saying though, I wonder if this has anything to do with our next opponent."

"Hmm..." Chaud mused. Their opponent was Junkman. exe from Yumland... There was a junk data problem in Yumland... "Entirely possible. Okay, Protoman, tell them we accept. There's a few days before the next round starts while they hold some exhibition matches between the invitees that didn't qualify so inform them that we'll be on the first flight to Yumland to take care of the problem on site."

"You know, that was kind of fun," Hub smiled as he strolled along after the meeting with Kendoman. exe. Just like in his future memories, the strict training navi had sent him off to complete training before he'd meet with him, having no idea that Hub was in fact his next opponent.

"Yeah, and since Mr. Famous apparently flew some of his top apprentices in for interviews from the tournament sponsors he should be just fine before the next round. Hmm... what to do today..."

"Let's see, Yai and Mayl are going sightseeing with Roll and Glide... Dex and Gutsman somehow got roped into some exhibition matches... Mary, Kai, Ring, and Turboman are back home holding the fort in case something happens there... You could always finish your homework."

"Ugh..." Lan groaned. "After last night's marathon study session? No way! I need some time off... Hmm..."

"What is it Lan?" Hub asked.

"The GunDelSol chips... I just remembered something from those future memories of ours. An encounter deep in the undernet..."

"Wait a sec..." Hub paused as the same memories flitted across his mind. "You don't really think that we can *actually* meet the *real* Django the Solar Boy in the undernet, do you?"

"There's only one way to find out for su~ure..." Lan wheedled.

"But..." Hub started to protest before giving it up as a bad job. "Ahh... Okay, I'd never forgive myself if it actually turned out to be true. Come on, let's go before I change my mind!"

Chaud's temper was growing, but he did his best to keep it under control. Protoman. exe had been acting strange since he'd gotten back from the data junkyard. Ever since that freak mass of junk data had fallen on top of him in fact. More and more, Chaud was beginning to wonder if Protoman. exe... was really Protoman. exe.

"Tournaments are such a drag, ya know?" said navi drawled with a cocky grin. "Why do we even enter them? Let's just withdraw and go have fun, eh?"

Chaud twitched. There was no way Protoman. exe would ever talk like that unless he was corrupted by bad data... Or unless he was an imposter.

"We can't, Protoman. You remember what we promised Lan and Megaman, right?"

"Uh... yeah, of course!" Protoman. exe hesitated for only a moment. "We promised that we'd beat their punk asses! But we can do that anytime!"

'No...' Chaud managed to force himself to not say out loud. *'We promised them that we'd finally settle which of us is better.'* That settled it. The navi that looked like Protoman. exe was actually not Protoman. exe. But if he let on that he knew, there was a good chance that his only lead to where his navi actually was would evaporate. "Exactly," he forced himself to say. "But first, we have a job to complete. I suspect that our upcoming opponent Junkman is both behind the sudden proliferation of junk data in Yumland's net as well as the attack on you in the data junkyard."

"Eh-heh..." Protoman. exe sounded nervous in a way Chaud did not miss. "R-right... Forgot about that... Oh, well... you're the boss...!"

"Indeed," Chaud nodded firmly as he thought over the information he and the real Protoman. exe had reviewed on the flight over. "We'll need advice first. I understand that this part of Yumland has a Buddha statue with its own cyber-space for healing troubled souls. We'll begin there."

"Look," Hub heard a stern wizened voice say up ahead, "just because this time we managed to come to some... strange realm where static fills the sky does not mean that this 'strange blue warrior' of yours actually exists!"

"Look, Master," an exasperated sigh replied, "I *told* you–"

"Nor does the fact that you suddenly 'recall' his name!" the stern voice interrupted. "Nor does it matter what that lazy bum of a so-called 'god' Apollo says! You managed to keep a hold of the 'Solar Sensor' we need to gather sunlight despite being ambushed by these so-called 'viruses', so let us go ahead and use it! You seem to keep forgetting we have an eternal duty to perform! To cleanse all worlds of undying immortals no matter how many times they are revived!"

"Yes, Master Setsuna..." the sarcastic reply came as Hub drew closer. (43)

"And stop calling me by a woman's name whenever you disagree with me!" the stern voice shouted. "You yourself admitted that certain memories of this 'baseline' were incomplete, and so any developments concerning them are to be viewed with all due suspicion!"

Hub turned the corner and spied the familiar runic diagram of the Pile Driver spread out on a relatively empty portion of the undernet, a decorated black coffin lying in the center. And sitting atop the coffin arguing with a giant floating seven-petaled sunflower was a sun-haired youth in gray and yellow clothes, a pair of goggles resting on his forehead, a long crimson scarf wrapped around his neck, and one of the most familiarly bizarre guns held firmly in his hand.

"And besides, what kind of name is 'Megaman' anyway?" the floating sunflower huffed, crossing his leaves like a person or navi would cross their arms.

"Actually, my real name is Hub," the blue navi decided to make himself known, smiling and waving in casual greeting (as opposed to his inner fanboy's desire to totally and completely geek out) as the sunflower whipped around, its face showing utter shock, and the sun-haired boy turned to face Hub with a smile of relieved recognition. "Solar Boy Django and Master Otenko, I presume?"

"Indeed," the boy, Django, replied pleasantly and stood to greet the navi while the sunflower, Master Otenko, floated there gaping comically wide. "We have a lot to talk about... Hub did you say?"

"And Lan!" Lan finally found his voice and spoke over the connection, trying his best to not embarrass himself by freaking out. "Hub's brother, NetOp, and–"

A rattling sound interrupted as the coffin shook violently.

"I think we can finish this after dealing with... Shademan was his name I believe," Django turned to consider the coffin as it attempted to slink away. He tosses a brightly glowing piece of data to Hub as he did. "Take this and install it, quick!"

"Right!" Hub agreed as he caught the Solar Sensor data. As Lan hurried to install it, Hub jumped into action and grabbed a chain dangling from the coffin and dragged it back into the center of the Pile Driver diagram while Django and Master Otenko (shaking off his astonishment) got into position.

"Lan!" Django yelled. "Hold your PET up to the sunlight so we can purify Shademan!"

"Got it!" Lan replied.

"Here we go!" Master Otenko declared.

"Taiyohhhhhhh!" three voices yelled out as the Pile Driver activated, Django's GunDelSol held high to the sky to facilitate the transfer of solar energy to the two giant mechanical mirrors emerging from the edges of the diagram and aiming themselves at the coffin in the center. Focusing the transmitted sunlight, they lanced two massive beams directly at the coffin which began to smoke and shudder before the form of Shademan. exe burst forth, the sunlight wrapping around his digital body as it attempted to purify his darkness away.

"Guwohhhhhh!" the vampiric navi roared as he smoked and smoldered from the assault. "Grrr... Did you really think this could defeat me, a denizen of the darkness?!"

DarkPower built up within Shademan. exe and began to force the beams of sunlight back.

"Well, maybe we just need to tip the scales!" Lan countered. "GunDelSol EX! Battlechip in! Download!"

"Return to the darkness you crawled out of!" Hub yelled as a replica of Django's GunDelSol appeared in his hands and a massive spread of sunlight shot forth, engulfing Shademan. exe and sapping the strength he was using to repel the PileDriver.

"Guwohhhhhh!" Shademan. exe roared anew as the PileDriver's power burned away at his form. "You can't defeat me! I shall return! While there is darkness in the world, we darkloids shall always return! You can never be rid o–"

"TAIYOHHHHHHH!"

"Booyah! That's the mighty Apollo's boy Django! Say it with the great Apollo! 1! 2! 3! DJANGO!"

"You do realize that phrase references the wrong Django, right?" (44)

"Do not harsh the sensational Apollo's groove!"

"A navi who seeks to save his soul?" the Yumlandian known as Madame Jane, keeper of the reclining buddha, asked as she peered into Chaud's eyes. "I see. There is truth in your eyes. You may jack into the reclining Buddha. I hope you find what it is you seek."

Chaud bowed thankfully and then made his way over to the jack-in port and did his best to act as if everything were normal. "Jack in!

Protoman, Execute!"

The false Protoman. exe appeared in the Buddha's cyberscape and a voice immediately greeted him.

"Ah," a serene navi designed after the statue itself greeted, "You are quite the troubled soul indeed, are you not?"

"Er... no," the fake Protoman. exe hedged nervously. "This is for some navi named Junkman, and–"

"Falsehoods do not become you, lonely one," the Buddha-navi smiled serenely. "Truth shall always beckon to truth, and I see the longing in your eyes and form, no matter how you try to hide them. You have a soul filled with pain and rage, because you have never had anything to balance it with. Because you lack kindness in your existence. You seek it from others, but do not know how to give it yourself. But that can all change."

The Buddha-navi held out a softly glowing piece of data. The false Protoman. exe tried to look away, but his gaze was clearly drawn to it no matter how he tried to pretend otherwise.

"This is kindness data. It does not merely give out tenderness and compassion, it is designed to help one find it within themselves. For when they find it in themselves, they will surely find it in others."

Without even realizing he'd done so, the imposter had held his hand out for the Buddha-navi to place the data into. He proceeded to stare at it as if it would explain his own actions to him.

"Protoman?" Chaud asked.

"So you knew..." the imposter's voice deepened and took on a metallic quality as he continued to stare at the kindness data in his palm. "You knew I had taken over your navi's body... You know that I am Junkman... The navi born in the net's junkyard without anyone

ever knowing. Never seeing, never listening. That is when I decided..."

Junkman. exe clenched the borrowed fist of Protoman. exe around the kindness data and began to squeeze.

"...that I would take all navis spoiled by operators and turn them to junk! Did you really think I wanted to be saved?! That I was looking for kindness?!"

The softly glowing data cracked once under the pressure and then shattered.

"I see the angry Buddha still chooses the hardest path," the Buddha-navi shook his head sadly and turned away.

"It didn't need to end like this you know," the form of Protoman. exe trembled under Junkman. exe's rage. "You could have been happy with me as your navi. I could have been just like him. You'd have never needed to know..."

"You could never have been like Protoman..." Chaud replied wearily, prompting a look of rage to form on the borrowed face of said navi, "because you're too much like me."

The look of rage changed to one of confusion as, unseen in the cyber-realm, Chaud prostrated himself before the Buddha statue and a particular navi within.

"It doesn't matter if you live in a penthouse or in the garbage, the bite of loneliness is just as deep. Just as painful. That's why I made Protoman. Programmed him from scratch and then trained our technique so that we'd never lose to anyone. So I'd have at least one real friend that would never leave. So please, whatever you want, just let me have my friend back..."

"Hmph!" Junkman. exe sneered with his borrowed face. "My condition is that we battle. Immediately and to the end. No way to

jack out, and no interference from you. Whoever is left at the end shall be your navi. If you made Protoman as strong as you claim, then he will be returned to you."

"I... thank you," Chaud replied solemnly as he jacked Junkman. exe out.

'But sometimes the hardest path can lead to the grandest things,' the Buddha-navi thought to himself after the data beam had faded.

"Okay, I think we got everything," Hub stated as the explanation finished. "Just one thing: Are you *serious* ?!"

"Open your ears boy!" Master Otenko whacked Hub with one of his leaves. "Anyone with a lick of sense can tell that time is not behaving properly!"

"More like entities that have a cosmic connection to some part of the fabric or reality, like embodiments of the sun, can sometimes innately tell something's up even if they're not looping themselves. It's generally known as being 'Loop Aware'," Django clarified much more patiently.

"And with us... offline, you've been going through variants instead of your... baseline?" Lan added, trying to process the information with a dedication that he never seemed to apply to school.

"Essentially," Django shrugged. "It hasn't actually been too different in many ways. The immortals I fight have just tended to be over-the-top hammy for the longest time with really bad accents."

"Uh, weren't they already a bit over-the–"

"At least twice as bad as whatever you're thinking. Plus Master Otenko tends to default to 'grumpy old man', which is how he started looping himself."

"Hey!" Otenko huffed indignantly.

"Lita's been taking to the whole thing like a fish to water too," Django continued, ignoring Master Otenko's outburst, "though she likes using the abilities she's picked up to give herself animal traits a little too much at times..."

"You have one crazy girlfriend..." Lan sweatdropped.

"Oh, just wait until yours starts looping," Django smirked. "She'll get plenty crazy soon enough."

"Heh... sorry, this is just a lot to take in..."

"Tell me about it. I may be my branch's Anchor, like one of you is, but I'm still relatively new, so I still find it a bit overwhelming myself at times. But anyway, Master Otenko and I need to get going. It was nice seeing you again."

"Hey, wait!" Hub protested. "Do you know which of us is the Anchor and which is the co-Anchor?"

"Sorry," Django apologized, "but our admin Apollo didn't really say when he popped down to give me the heads-up. Oh, and before I forget, I wanted to give you this," the Solar Boy handed over a piece of data that Hub accepted, the blue navi's eyes widening as he identified it as GunDelSol3. "I suspect that you will face many more dark denizens in your own quest, but you mustn't give in to the darkness. Use this if you find yourself tempted and know that no matter how dark things get, the sun will rise tomorrow."

"Th-thanks!" Hub stammered out.

"Oh, and keep practicing those techniques I showed you and Lan!" Django called back as he ran off. "They come in real handy!"

"Thank you for returning for me, Lord Chaud," Protoman. exe stated as he moved his own body again.

"You should wait to give your thanks," Junkman. exe's own mismatched body emerged from the junk data of the digital junkyard. "Your NetOp and I have an agreement. In exchange for returning your body to you, we shall duel, without operator interference, for the right to be his navi."

"I see..." Protoman. exe stated evenly, his tone and expression betraying nothing. "Very well then."

"Then begin whenever you are ready," Junkman. exe groaned out with his metallic voice.

"I shall not fail Lord Chaud," Protoman. exe stated firmly before dashing forward at immense speeds, crossing Junkman. exe three times and slashing before returning to his starting point. "Delta! Ray! Edge!"

"...It that the best you can do?" Junkman. exe asked, prompting Protoman. exe to turn and see the three masses of junk data split neatly in half from where they'd intercepted his strikes.

"No," Protoman. exe stated with the slightest of grins, "but you're the first to actually counter it."

"Then let us see what you can really do," Junkman. exe declared as more masses of junk data began to float up from the area and hurl themselves at Protoman. exe who dashed forwards darting and slashing his way through.

"You know," a girl with long blonde hair sighed with a Sharo accent, "dis is why sensei kicked you out and sealed your navi's battle skills."

"Yeah," a guy wearing shaded goggles and bright red hair pulled back in a spiky ponytail/topknot thing added. "You just think

everything should be handed to you on a platter, never wanting to actually do the work or care about others. Sensei always said you showed great promise, but never bothered to live up to it."

"What do you know?" the bound man glared hotly. "That damn seal of his won't go away! I've changed PETs ten times and gone through five navis, but it's still there! I haven't been able to beat mettaurs since he did that! *Mettaurs!* Do you have any idea how humiliating that is for someone of my talents?! Famous owes me! And I'll see that he pays through the nommmpphhhh!"

"Finally!" the mohawked member of the trio sighed in relief as he finished tying a thick gag over the man's mouth and dusted off his camo pants. "If we hadn't been watching the latest tournaments, I'd swear he was the most self-centered guy on the planet!"

"Psh!" the girl scoffed. "Chillski is much worse, ya? A complete embarrassment to anyone of Sharo descent!"

"I dunno," the crimson-haired guy mused, "that Viddy Narcy character is certainly up there. And in any case, we've got to get this guy deported back to wherever he's from."

"Isn't he from Netopia?"

"Hey, ya! We could escort him back and make sensei's match!"

"The mighty Apollo would like to know if these guys are baseline?"

"Doubtful. If they are, Lan and Hub never met them in the original timeline."

"Pity..."

"Impressive," Junkman. exe declared, "but it appears you're at your limit."

"Heh..." Protoman. exe smirked back. "Actually, I think I'm just about ready to take it to the next level. Sorry Lord Chaud. It seems I'll have to use *that* . Initiate Style Change!"

"What? But–" Chaud cut himself off, reminding himself that this was solely between Junkman. exe and Protoman. exe. Everything about this match was out of his hands.

"Muramasa Style!" Protoman. exe finished as his armor turned to cloth, his sword-arm turned to a normal hand, and a sheathed katana appeared at his waist.

"Impressive," Junkman. exe allowed. "It seems that you too know the power granted by pain to hold such a woe-thirsty blade so. I wonder which is stronger though... your pain or mine?"

"Let's find out!" Protoman. exe shouted as he dashed forward at impossible speeds, ducking to the side of his opponent's arms shooting forward in the form of a massive Junk Press and slashing, being rewarded with a pained bellow as Junkman. exe only retracted one arm. He made to finish it, but was knocked aside by the remaining arm which then began shooting screws that tracked Protoman. exe's position.

Protoman. exe grit his teeth as he dashed forward, using the pain from the hits that landed to further fuel Muramasa as he aimed a lunge straight for Junkman. exe's glowing eyes.

The blade was an inch from contact when a dark ominous sound permeated the area and froze him in place.

"Who dares?" Junkman. exe demanded, somehow still able to move, if only stiffly.

"Damn..." a new voice was heard as a group of HeelNavis, their bodies blackened through contact with darkness rather than through customization, stepped into view, a shadowy black trumpy-like virus playing the paralyzing music behind them. "Moving while DarkSound

is in effect? That's hardcore. But we're not here for you. The boss wants the DarkSoul the red guy's been nurturing," the one in front motioned to the immobile Protoman. exe. "It's just about ripe after all."

"You will do no such thing!" Junkman. exe declared angrily as masses of junk data rose up and flung themselves at the HeelNavis.

"Get the red guy!" the lead HeelNavi declared as a sinisterly glowing bomb chip appeared in his hand. "I've got the walking junkheap! DarkBomb!"

"JunkCube!" one of the flung masses intercepted the DarkBomb before it got within blast range, but the smoke from the blast still obscured the area and a clear scuffle could be heard amidst the smokescreen.

"No! Protoman!" Chaud yelled as he tried to jack his navi out, only to find that the ability had been predictably blocked. Either by Junkman. exe for the duel, or the assailants for the attack.

When it cleared, the HeelNavis could be seen taking off with a back-to-normal Protoman. exe who was bound in glowing restraints.

"COWARDS!" Junkman. exe roared as he shot screws after the retreating group, but only scoring glancing shots at best.

"Protoman..." Chaud despaired as he watched his navi be carried off by what could only be agents of Nebula. "No..."

"...Worry not," Junkman. exe stated after several moments. "They are leaking data from their wounds. I can use it to find them. I will retrieve your... friend... for you."

"What...? Why?"

"I am a navi of my word," Junkman. exe ground out succinctly. "Had they not interfered, the victory would have been his. There is

something we must do first though."

"What?"

"Register my withdrawal from the tournament."

"Hey guys!" an Electopian who would probably be lost in a crowd if it wasn't for his light blue sleeveless vest with purple trim and his red headband with loose ends that went all the way to his knees called out as he approached Mr. Famous's three apprentices who were currently gathered around someone.

"Hey Takeshi!" the goggle-wearing redhead smirked. "I'm glad you made it. I'm even more glad it's because you got spanked in the first round."

"Hey!" Takeshi fumed. "Stop picking on me, Bullet! Charlie, make him stop picking on me!"

"Maybe he'd stop if you didn't whine so much," the Netopian guy with the blond mohawk pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Ja," the blonde girl with the Sharo accent smirked.

"Heh... you guys seem like good friends," another voice spoke up.

"Yeah, Lan, they sure do," a second joined in from roughly the same direction.

"Lan...?" Takeshi stiffened and looked around until he spotted the smaller boy in the middle of the other three. "Oh... wow... I am such a big fan of yours! Guys! You know this kid saved the world?!"

"We know," the other three deadpanned.

"You mention it only every other day, ya?" the girl gave him a deadpan gaze.

"Yeah, man," Bullet shook his head. "You even customized your navi to look like his. It's really kind of creepy."

"Hey!" Takeshi looked insulted. "I didn't copy the face! Which reminds me... Hey, Lan, buddy, would you mind if I took a good look at Megaman's face?"

"I'd really rather you didn't," the voice came not from Lan, but from his PET.

"And I like my current face just fine, Takeshi," a voice from the 'soul battler's' own PET chimed in.

"Aw, c'mon, Quint!"

"Guys," Takeshi's navi didn't even deign his NetOp with a direct response, "promise me that if this obsession causes Takeshi to start dressing like Lan that you'll tie him up until he regains whatever passes for good sense."

"Of course," the Sharo girl replied readily.

"And you can crash with me if that happens," a voice from her PET added.

"Thanks, Enker."

"Hey! I wanted him to crash with me!"

"The last time any navi went to your place, Ballade, you tried to blow them up!"

"Only a little! It was one of my friendly hello bombs!"

"Your 'friendly hello bomb' nearly took my head off!" Quint yelled.

"Are they always like this?" Lan asked Charlie.

"More or less."

"Yeah!" a voice Lan recognized as Punk. exe's piped up from Charlie's PET. "Ain't it great?"

"You... want to withdraw?" the tournament official blinked at the image of the navi. "Why?"

"Protoman and I have already had our match and the victory was decisively in his favor," the grinding metallic voice of Junkman. exe explained. "I see no reason to repeat it."

"Ah, that may be, but it's not in official records and–"

"There is a recording of the match if you desire it. The final blow may not have been caught properly, but the victor is very clear."

"I really can't accept–"

"Then I would like to confess to hijacking the body of my opponent prior to our match. I understand that under tournament rules this is grounds for disqualification," Junkman. exe explained with clearly waning patience.

"Well, yes, but unless you have proof, then–"

"Look," Junkman. exe's glowing eyes flared sinisterly, "I do not know why you are so determined to keep me in this tournament and I do not *care* . Simply know that I will *not* be present for my scheduled match. Good. Day."

The transmission cut out and the tournament official groaned in dismay. Why oh why did she have to make that bet with her boyfriend? The outfit she'd have to wear if Protoman. exe made it to the finals was already really skimpy, but the cat ears and tail that went with it would make her look like a crazy cosplayer! She'd die of embarrassment now!

"They thought they could hold me, but they were wrong... My revenge cannot be tied down! Not now that I have you..."

"Heh... You're just lucky I've been looking for someone good enough to keep up with me since my last boss got himself offed. I gotta say though, this thing's gonna take some serious power to crack. Good thing for you I got just the stuff..." (45)

"What... what are these...?"

"Some souvenirs I picked up from a bunch of chumps that call themselves Nebula..."

"Well, Protoman," one of the Nebula navis chuckled darkly. "It looks like you're ours now. Soon enough we'll be pulling that lovely little DarkSoul you've been cultivating out and you'll be one of us. Never to stand with that former NetOp of yours ever again... Hehehe..."

"I would never betray Lord Chaud..." Protoman. exe glared at the Nebula member. "Not even in the deepest darkest depths of madness..."

"Hahahahaha!" the navi just laughed. "Well, we'll see about that! Won't we, boys?"

"YEAH!" went the resounding cheer from an army of Nebula navis gathered around to watch the conversion of one of their most dangerous foes.

"So, Lan," Mr. Famous grinned as he approached the battlecomp, "I see you met my top apprentices, the Elite Four."

"Better known to the scum of the net as the NetNavi Killers!" a quartet of voices yelled loudly from the stands.

"...Who just don't appreciate a good name when they hear one," Mr. Famous sighed heavily.

"They're... different," Lan chuckled. "Actually, they remind me a bit of my friends."

"I'll bet. Still, we're here for a match and we don't intend to hold back!"

"I wouldn't have it any other way!"

"And it looks like the competitors are raring to go!" the lady from NAXA declared to the crowd. "Representing NetFrica, the world famous Mr. Famous and his navi Kendoman!"

The crowd cheered at deafening levels.

"And representing Electopia, the grade-school NetBattler Lan Hikari and his navi Megaman!"

The cheers, if anything, actually got louder.

"Competitors ready? Jack in! Battle Routine, set!"

"Execute!"

"Heeyah!"

"The chips you normally use were chosen to best suit your navi's fighting style. I am not him."

"I'm sorry, but I've never had the time or desire to go and collect chips from viruses. Those I do get tend to get traded for ones I want."

"It is of no consequence. Though I have never had an operator to send them, you would be surprised at the power that net society throws away."

"What in... Most of these are useless bootleg chips, but some of these others... Some of these are really rare discontinued chips or data gained only from extinct viruses... People really throw these away?"

"They do. Choose wisely. The life of your friend may depend on your selection."

"Well, well, look at the walking hunk of junk, boys..." the darkened HeelNavi jeered as he saw the massive mismatched form approach.

"Hehe... Go home junkheap," another of their number laughed. "This is Nebula's turf."

"We are here for Protoman, the red navi you hold captive. You will return him immediately."

"Yeah?" the attention of the mass of navis, many bearing the visible taint of darkness, focused on the newcomer. "And what if we say n–"

The navi's words were cut off as a massive screw punched through the space his head occupied and pierced through the navi behind him.

"Dude... you must be *real* tired of living..." another declared lowly as most of the gathered navis began to form a variety of weapons. "We're Nebula... Wielders of the power of Darkness!"

"More like petty cowards hiding behind what you can never understand or control... I am Junkman..." the mismatched navi declared as the yellow light from his shadowed eyes glowed back at his foes menacingly. "I was born in the darkness... Formed from shadows, pain, and rage... I do not fear your petty darkness..."

"We'll show you!" the same navi yelled as he formed his arm into a buster. "DarkChip in! DarkSpread!"

"Fool..."

"I've never even heard of some of these before... AntiDark...?"

The buster backfired spectacularly, the explosion of DarkPower disintegrating the navi in question and at least a dozen other navis nearby, as the discarded experimental chip AntiDark that Chaud had slotted in discretely at the beginning of the encounter did exactly what it was supposed to.

"The hell was that?!" one of the Nebula navis yelled in shock and confusion.

"Who cares! Get him!" another yelled.

"Mindbender! BattleChip in! Download!" the voice of Chaud came in loud and clear over the connection.

"Mindbender... Poltergeist... I haven't seen anyone use these in almost a year..."

"Ah, those... Personal favorites... They were part of the junk data that I formed from... I can use the first sometimes without a chip, though not reliably... but the second... I was perhaps fortunate that someone threw away a source file for it... I can use the power of the vengeful spirit at will..."

Chaos reigned as Nebula navis began attacking, only to find that they were shooting everywhere except what they meant to aim at. Roughly a quarter of their number perished from their own opening volley.

Those that had the presence of mind to try and get their bearings stopped and gaped as great masses of debris and junk data rose up around their opponent and began to fly at them with great speed.

The audience cheered as Kendoman. exe parried shots from Megaman. exe in perfect synch with the movements of Mr. Famous. They also cheered as Megaman. exe skillfully dodged Kendoman.

exe's lightning fast strikes. They went nuts as each competitor launched counterattack after counterattack at each other, resulting in what sounded like a never-ending din that could be heard for miles around.

Kendoman. exe was one of the most atypical navis that most of the audience had ever seen. His individual strikes were not terribly powerful, but they were amazingly fast and he could launch them in rapid succession. It was how he had inevitably worn down the defensive powerhouse Knightman. exe, by simply hitting the larger slower navi over and over with repeated strikes and never allowing the strong but slow attacks of the knight-themed navi to land in return.

"Got it!" Megaman. exe's operator suddenly yelled out, a triumphant look on his face. "Get ready, Hub!"

"Ready and waiting!" Megaman. exe replied as he backstepped quickly from his opponent.

"Not so fast!" Mr. Famous and Kendoman. exe declared together, darting forwards in a dashing strike to press their advantage and deny their opponent the distance he seemed to desire.

"Guard!" Lan and Megaman. exe yelled as Kendoman. exe's strike hit a yellow shield with the green cross of the mettaur virus, the backlash of the strike's force knocking Kendoman. exe off-balance for a moment. A moment that was more than enough for his opponent. "And now GunDelSol EX! TAIYOHHHHHHH!"

"ARGH!" Kendoman. exe and Mr. Famous yelled as the massive spread of sunlight engulfed Kendoman. exe and seared at his digital form aggressively until the inevitable happened.

"Kendoman... Deleted!"

"What is it you sense, Lord Serenade?" the purple-armored former member of SciLab's Elite Corps asked of the silently meditating figure.

"How many times must I tell you, Yamatoman?" the dark-skinned female navi smiled tolerantly. "Please call me by my new title."

"My apologies, Guardian Regent," Yamatoman. exe replied in a tone that suggested his personal views on the matter would never change.

"It is fine," Serenade. exe allowed. "As would your use of just my name be."

"What you sense, Guardian Regent?" Yamatoman. exe avoided the topic in favor of his original query.

"A deep and terrible rage has entered the undernet. One born of a great capacity for love and respect that has withered through loneliness and neglect, turning instead to hate and spite. A wrath more terrible than heaven or hell could unleash on their own merits. But a wrath turned against those who seek to spread hate and spite for their own petty reasons, out of what little remaining love and respect for those same virtues still remains."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning..." Serenade. exe smirked teasingly, "that Buddha is angry."

A shadowy NormalNavi flew through the air, flailing wildly before it intercepted a thrown DarkBomb, causing the powerful chip to detonate early.

An OfficialNavi of Nebula choked as the massive navi's clamp-like appendage, turned golden from the legendary discontinued GoldFist chip, slammed him into a floating RockCube so hard that he became

embedded in the digital object even as it was sent hurtling into the ranks of Nebula navis.

"Whoever the hell is using obstacle-type chips, stop! You're just giving him more fu–!"

The words were cut off as a tornado made of flame sprouted in the middle of Nebula's ranks and Junkman. exe continued his advance.

"DarkSword!" one of the Nebula navis yelled as he jumped at Junkman. exe's back, only for his opponent to reach back and grab the member of Nebula and swing him around like a flail, turning the DarkSword on the navi's fellows as a result.

"Return to Junk!" the massive navi bellowed like a skyscraper collapsing.

"Got you now!" several navis jumped at him from all angles, clearly getting ready to use BattleChips of some sort. "Dodge this you piece of–"

"Interrupt!" Chaud's voice called out as the discontinued chip was sent, disrupting all chip data from Junkman. exe's opponents.

"–cking hell!" several of the ambushing navis swore as their attacks were cancelled, leaving them to crash bodily into the larger navi, who remained standing even under their weight. Several were faster in recovering and formed their basic buster cannons. "Damnit! We can still take you out like this!"

"RingZap, triple download! Experimental Program Advance!"

"ZapBody!" Junkman. exe bellowed as electrical sparks arced all over his form, frying the navis that had jumped him. Their cries of pain drowned out Chaud's swearing as the three discontinued chips' programs were irrevocably damaged from the makeshift hacking job that had allowed the advance in the first place.

"DarkVulcan!" another voice yelled out.

"IronShield!" Chaud sent a discontinued defensive chip next, but the piercing rounds of the DarkVulcan tore it apart even as they tore into Junkman. exe's body. "Shit! LeafShield!"

"DarkLance!"

The chip was none too soon as the massive damage from the DarkLance was instead added to Junkman. exe's vitality from LeafShield's healing powers.

"Screw this!" someone among the ranks yelled out. "DarkStage!"

An intense miasma engulfed the field as darkness oozed up from the ground. Many of Nebula's members yelled out as the corrosive force ate away at their bodies, but most seemed to be strengthened by it.

"Yes! Feel your body burn away into nothingness!" the same voice cackled as the miasma ate away at Junkman. exe's own body. However, the monstrous navi seemed unconcerned as Chaud slotted a new chip in.

"Geddon1."

The miasma began to dissipate rapidly as the entire area shuddered and cracked from the force unleashed, the digital panels making up the ground becoming precarious and fragile.

"Pathetic..." Junkman. exe's disdain was palpable. "You steep yourselves in Darkness, but you cannot even match the strength that net society *throws away* ... Do you even understand the power that is discarded as junk...? Let us show you..."

"PanelShoot1... PanelShoot2... PanelShoot3..."

The ground shuddered again as the digital panels not occupied ripped themselves out wholesale and hovered ominously in the air. And then they began flying at everything that wasn't Junkman. exe.

Screams of pain and terror reigned as the members of Nebula were assaulted by chunks of the very digital landscape, chunks torn from what had been their only footholds to avoid the assault.

As the assault died down, someone among the Nebula navis began laughing hysterically.

"Not bad! But you can't beat Nebula with just a good folder and a strong navi!" Nebula navis that had survived began to get up and edge their way into the scarred cyberscape until one lone navi modded from a basic male FaceNavi stood facing Junkman. exe. "My operator and I are the premier hackers of Nebula! We're so good we managed to hack the legendary Dark Messiah himself to finish the legendary Program Advance of Darkness! DarkLine! Evil Chip in! Download! BugChain! Evil Chip in! Download! Bass! Navi Chip in! Download!"

"AntiFire, AntiAqua, AntiElec, AntiWood..." Chaud slotted in another set of someone's discarded attempts to modify a chip series in response.

"Program Advance of Darkness! DARK MESSIAH!"

A shadow of the legendary solo navi Bass. exe emerged to hover over the Nebula member as the navi's own hands formed a Gospel-head cannon and fired massive bursts at Junkman. exe, throwing up huge gouts of digital dust as they further tore apart the cyberscape as well. But out of the dust cloud emerged blasts of flame, water, lightning, and plant matter that lanced down towards the no-longer-laughing navi and tore him and what little remained of the cyberscape around him to shreds.

"The... the hell was *that* ...?" one member of Nebula gaped at the gash where his comrade had once stood.

"I don't know, but that junk guy's folder has gotta be nearly out by now and we can still all use DarkChips, so let's get him!"

"You think that, do you?" Junkman's grinding voice sounded as the dust cloud dissipated, showing him to be only slightly worse for wear than before the attack. "You are right by my count. We have but one BattleChip left..."

"I do not know if that was actually thrown away. Perhaps it was simply lost..."

"Who in the world lets themselves lose a chip like this *?"*

The gleam in Junkman. exe's eyes was more sinister than any of his darkness-imbued opponents'.

"FolderBack..."

Hub tried not to blush as the four navis of Mr. Famous's top apprentices hoisted him up from within the battlecomp to the cheers of the crowd. A moment only partially ruined by Lan sneezing.

"You okay, Lan?"

"Yeah, after what just happened somebody's probably just talking about me, you know?" (46)

"Let them, Lan," Mr. Famous shook his head.

"Yes!" Kendoman. exe laughed boisterously. "After Junkman's withdrawal, these people deserved to see a match between the mightiest of warriors! Hahahahahahaha!"

"Hehehehehehehe..."

"What..." the announcer from NAXA started. "Who said that...?"

A data beam flashed in the battlecomp as a new navi appeared. He was on all fours with gray orbs for toes attached to cylindrical dark blue feet at the ends of limbs that looked like a series of black megaphones jammed into each other. His main body was dark blue

with twinned spikes sprouting from both the lower back and the shoulders. His face was behind a long translucent red cone that jutted out before his glowing yellow eyes and a pair of long antenna jutted out from his head.

"How quaint..." the navi spoke with a voice that distorted like a bad audio transmission. "the navi that beat the famous Mr. Famous being celebrated by the man's own apprentices. The very apprentices unworthy of his attention. Hehehehehe..."

"Hey! Watch your mouth!" Takeshi growled as the four navis set Hub down and stepped between him and the newcomer.

"Megaman, jack out, we'll handle this guy," the green navi that looked so much like Hub save for the blue shades over his face, Quint. exe, told him.

"Right..." Hub went to jack out, turning into a data beam that shot towards the open connection to Lan's PET... only to slam into a barrier of interference that sprang up suddenly and held him fast in its grip.

"Hub!" Lan yelled in shock as gasps of shock rippled through the crowd.

"Lan... I... I can't... move..."

"What did you do?!" the red-armored navi of the quartet, with whip-like arms, giant disc-like shoulder pads, liberal spikes decorating his form, and a bladed mohawk demanded. Punk. exe was very much furious. His teammates, human and navi alike, were little different.

"Oh, that?" the strange navi laughed statically. "I jammed the battlecomp. No one jacks in or out until I say so..."

"Until *we* say so," a new voice cut in as a display popped up in the cyberspace, and the holographic display above. A display showing the maniacally grinning face of Mr. Famous's dishonored student.

"How the hell did you get out?" Bullet grit his teeth and glared. In the cyberspace, his navi Ballade. exe, who looked very much like a standard purple male FaceNavi stuffed into a weaponized bomb suit and given bladed crests on his helmet, glared as well.

"My new navi Jammingman helped me out," the man grinned sadistically. "Turns out he's been looking for someone strong to throw his lot in with and I fit the bill. He even showed me how to get rid of Famous's annoying seal!"

"Yeah, right," the androgynous voice of the last navi of the quartet scoffed. The blue and yellow patterned bodysuited form of Enker. exe floated calmly above the digital panels, his (or her, no one was quite sure) arms crossed pointedly as four softly glowing orbs hovered in an arc behind him/her.

"Da," Enker. exe's operator and the one female member of the team mirrored the pose. "You could never break sensei's seal!"

"Then just watch as I do exactly that!" the man grinned madly as he held up an odd looking BattleChip. One that Lan, Hub, and apparently Mr. Famous immediately recognized.

"No, you idiot!" Mr. Famous yelled.

"DarkCannon! DarkChip in! Download!"

There was a strain on the cyberscape centered around Jammingman. exe as the chip data tried to force its way through for a moment before a loud crack sounded and a massive cannon blast screamed towards the four navis who all moved deftly out of the way, allowing the attack to impact at a safe distance behind them.

"You see! The seal is broken!" the man laughed. "I have a powerful new navi, powerful new chips, and all of my skills back! Bwahahahahaha!"

"You're going to need them, bucko," Charlie stated calmly as the four navis in the battlecomp moved back into formation as the declaration continued. "Because now you face the ultimate strike force in the cyberworld!"

"Heart Champion," the sole girl began as she and Enker. exe struck a pose that would not be out of place in a magical girl series, "Kalinka Cossack and Enker!"

"Soul Battler," Takeshi and Quint. exe took poses like they were sentai heroes, "Takeshi Aono and Quint!"

"Extreme Hero," the crimson-haired Bullet grinned as he and Ballade. exe took a combat stance, "Bullet Baret and Ballade!"

"Mighty Soldier," Charlie joined in the posing himself as he finished the introductions, "Charlie Nash and Punk! Together we are the Elite Four of the cyberworld, known to criminals everywhere as the NetNavi Killers!" (47)

"Heh..." the disgraced apprentice laughed. "Hahahahaha! Then I guess that makes me the Dark Prodigy... Seijin Yami!" (48)

The now identified man kept laughing as everyone looked on, disturbed by the madness in his voice.

"Go Jammingman! Destroy them all!"

"Charlie Nash... Charlie Nash... The mighty Apollo has heard this name before... Isn't he from the Street Fighter branch that Nike oversees?"

Hephaestus just cursed under his breath as he examined the coding. He had been so *sure* he'd plugged all of those code leaks!

Chaud nursed the mild burn on his hand as he considered which BattleChip to send next. Things had been going so well. He and Junkman. exe had plowed through the ranks of Nebula like a bulldozer through a china shop.

But as was to be expected, the ones that survived this long were more often than not the stronger ones, or the smarter ones. As was the case of one Nebula navi that had waited until Chaud and Junkman. exe were using the FolderBack chip again and timed a backstab with a DarkSword perfectly. The maneuver had put the navi too close to avoid the devastating retaliatory strike, but the data interrupt from the attack backed by DarkPower had caused a surge in Chaud's PET that had burned his hand and pretty much obliterated the data for FolderBack permanently. This left him with a limited selection of BattleChips remaining unless Nebula's forces were kind enough to back off long enough for a standard folder reload to be used. Which he really didn't see happening.

'Hmm... Hammer...' Chaud considered the chip that was, in fact, not an actual hammer but instead a heavy ball and chain style weapon used by a short-lived type of virus that resembled the basic form of a navi to a casual observer. It was a bit unwieldy for most navis, but Junkman. exe swung them like a pro. And he still had a few left. *'And then... ZeusHammer... Better wait until a bunch of them swarm and use LeafShield first since otherwise it'll hurt Junkman too...'*

"Program Advance!" Ballade. exe yelled as he jumped high into the air. "CRAZY DESTROYER!" (49)

A deluge of disc-like bombs were thrown like shuriken at Jammingman. exe and the surrounding area in a cacophony of explosions, only to reveal when they subsided that the target was nowhere to be seen among the obliterated cyberscape.

"Crap!" Takeshi swore. "Quint! We're switching to defense!"

"Roger!" Quint. exe acknowledged. "Customizer build conversion! Defense matrix!"

"Wow..." Lan looked impressed as Jammingman. exe jumped out of a PopUp hole and fired off a vulcan-style DarkChip at Quint. exe, which pinged off of the green navi's swiftly formed crimson shield. It was the same kind of thing Shield Style could do. "I didn't know you could do stuff like that..."

"Oh, they're all quite brilliant operators," Mr. Famous replied as he watched calmly, "and save for Charlie they're brilliant customizers as well. Takeshi figured out how to save multiple program arrangements for the Navi Customizer and switch between them mid-battle so he could cover whatever the team needed at the moment. It cost him the ability to form style changes, but he's got enough of a program collection that they're almost redundant with his system."

"I guess that's why you had to help make Punk, right?" Lan inquired as the navi in question tried to ambush Jammingman. exe only to get a Slasher for his troubles. The crimson navi grunted from the hit, but recovered almost instantly.

"Something like that," Mr. Famous allowed as Charlie began barking instructions to the others. "What Charlie lacks in customization skills, he makes up for in operating ability and leadership. When they fight together, he and Punk are almost untouchable. Bullet and Ballade form the team's heavy artillery while also able to take a massive pounding when necessary even if they aren't all that fast or at times accurate."

Lan sweatdropped a bit as the navi in question charged through Jammingman. exe's electrical blasts ignoring the damage he was taking and threw yet more explosives. Given his choice of weapons, he didn't really seem to need pinpoint accuracy anyway.

"And then there's Kalinka and Enker," Mr. Famous continued, nodding towards the girl and the navi that was skillfully deflecting all shots sent his/her way by forming the glowing orbs that floated

around him/her into flat planar barriers and angling them in just the right way. "They're the team's shield. Not much gets through their defenses."

"Screw this!" Seijin yelled. "Jammingman! I'm sending another DarkChip!"

"Ready when you are!" the navi yelled back.

The head of the kidnapping force stared at the battle below. It was one thing to hear what a legend Eugene Chaud was. It was another to see him carving through a superior force with a navi that *wasn't even his* .

And despite the fact that the monstrous mismatched navi had all sorts of weaponry from landed hits sticking out of him by now, including the tip of a broken DarkSword still sticking out of his chest, he was still coming. Still countering every attack.

DarkThunder, DarkWide, DarkMeteor, and DarkLance had all triggered anti-element traps that had reduced what remained of their hundreds strong force to mere dozens and this bizarre misshapen navi showed no signs of slowing down. He was still coming... Still throwing around those masses of junk data debris and those damnable screw shots and...

And he was no longer using chip attacks.

"Hehehe... Hahahahaha! He's out of chips! He's out of chips! Do it now! Press the attack! Hit him with everything you've got! DarkStage!"

"DarkInvisibility!" Seijin yelled and Jammingman. exe's form tinted darker and he bellowed in berserk rage as he began teleporting around the arena attacking wildly, firing BattleChips at random and barely even bothering to aim them.

"We've gotta counterattack before he gets lucky!" Bullet yelled.

"No!" Lan cut in. "It's an invisible style chip, which means he's practically invincible! You need to use something that can cut through that!"

"Like what?" Kalinka yelled back.

"Like..." Lan fished in his pocket and pulled out three particular battle chips. "Like these! Here!" he yelled as he thrust them into Takeshi's hand.

"Are these...?" Takeshi's eyes widened and he tossed one to each of his teammates. "Guys! Get ready for BattleChip sharing! Quint and I will run interference! Customizer build conversion! Activate Support Program: Sakugarne!"

"Got it!" Charlie yelled as the other three each caught a chip. "Link up everyone! And don't you dare get Quint killed Takeshi! That's an order!"

"Roger that!" A crimson jackhammer-like weapon formed on Quint. exe's arm and he dashed forward to engage the berserk Jammingman. exe at close range while the other three got into position. It seemed that the Sakugarne program was pretty durable as it parried attack after attack with barely a scratch.

As that was happening, the other three pulled out linking cables and hooked all four PETs together in a circuit before brandishing the loaned BattleChips.

"Chip sharing initiated!" Kalinka began as Enker. exe took up position to Jammingman. exe's front "GunDelSol1 BattleChip in! Download!"

"GunDelSol2 BattleChip in! Download!" Bullet continued with Ballade. exe at Jammingman. exe's left.

"GunDelSol3 BattleChip in! Download!" Charlie finished with Punk. exe taking position at Jammingman. exe's back.

Quint. exe gave a twist with the Sakugarne weapon that sent the berserk navi off-balance and disengaged to take position on Jammingman. exe's right. "Four-way formation complete!"

"Four-way Program Advance!" all four yelled together as the BattleChip data merged along the link and a runic circle familiar to many present formed in the cyberscape centered on Jammingman. exe. A quartet of mechanical mirrors surged upwards and angled to point directly at Jammingman. exe. "PILEDRIVER!"

The solar rays blasted forth and burned away at Jammingman. exe even through his invincibility at a rapid pace.

"No...! NO!" Seijin cursed. "I won't let this happen! DARKTHUNDER!"

A massive sinister purple ball of electricity shot down one of the beams of light and impacted the solar mirror, disrupting the Program Advance and causing it to terminate early in a spectacular explosion. As the dust settled, Jammingman. exe could be seen still standing. Barely, but still standing.

"You..." he hissed at the navi in his direct line of sight, Enker. exe, "I'll kill you all for that..."

"We'll both kill them for that..." Seijin agreed angrily. "Starting with that one! DarkChip in!"

"Enker!" Kalinka yelled, but her navi was already bringing his/her four glowing orbs into a diamond pattern directly in front of him/her where they instantly stretched and curved into an ovular frame that filled with a silvery plane.

"DarkSpread!"

"MirrorBuster!"

The dark attack hit the mirror, which cracked mightily but held, and reflected the attack back at the shooter, destroying him with the very DarkPower he'd tried to use.

"That... It's not possible..." Seijin stared as the jamming interference ended and Hub finished jacking out.

"Holy crap..." Bullet stared as well. "That thing actually cracked the MirrorBuster?! Holy *crap* ..."

"You... you're all just second raters... haha..." Seijin began breaking down in front of everyone. "I'm the real genius... I'm the one who should have been the top apprentice... hahaha... I should have been replacing Mr. Famous as the navi expert... I'm the best... the best... hahahahaha... hahahahahahahahaha..."

"Poor guy..." Hub pitied the man.

"He once showed great promise," Mr. Famous nodded sadly. "But he could never look beyond his own talents to see the value in others."

"Junkman..." Chaud grit his teeth, not wanting to admit what was plain, "you've got to jack out..."

Even without BattleChips, the navi born of junk data had insisted on continuing. He'd asked Chaud to disengage the operation system and send subchips while Junkman. exe himself continued fighting. Reluctantly, Chaud had agreed. Despite the arrangement being far from perfect, it had worked for a short while. Nebula's forces were effectively gutted from this engagement and while Chaud hated to leave Protoman. exe behind, he had to admit that the current arrangement wasn't likely to succeed.

"No," Junkman. exe retorted as he used the powers of the Poltergeist data in him to wrench miasmic masses out of the digital

landscape and throw them at the few Nebula navis remaining. "I must do no such thing..."

"But I'm out of subchips!" Chaud yelled back, watching Junkman. exe's health drop steadily from the dark miasma that had seeped out of the cyberscape ever since the last use of DarkStage. "You'll die if you keep going!"

"I was already dying," Junkman. exe retorted as he trudged onwards, blasting another of the remaining Nebula navis with his screws. "I've been dying for quite some time now."

"But..."

"Those who cannot handle loss should never have friends," Junkman. exe continued as he pressed onwards, even as the dark miasma ate away at his form steadily. "That is what I believed. I took my only solace in battle, found my center in savage combat, and entered the tournament to meet my end the way I had lived. Fighting to the death against worthy opponents."

Junkman. exe grabbed a HeelNavi that jumped at him out of the air and slammed him into the ground. He kept his hold on the navi, dragging him roughly across the cyberscape as he pressed onwards.

"And then I met you and Protoman..."

Chaud watched as the junk data navi's health hit zero... and kept dropping.

"My rage and pain has sustained me this long," Junkman. exe's eyes glowed brightly even as more and more of his form disintegrated, "and with the power of the vengeful spirit it will sustain me long enough for this..."

"What... *are* ... you...?" the navi being dragged choked out as one of his few remaining comrades slashed Junkman. exe in the side, and was crushed by digital debris a moment later.

"I am a navi who has known pain his whole existence..." Junkman. exe said, though it was not clear to whom as he approached the spot where Protoman. exe was being held by glowing digital restraints, "and friendship but once. I have dealt in pain all my life, never doing anything but causing more of it. I sought my end upon the field of battle, but I never expected to be given a chance like this. A chance to do one good thing before I meet my end..."

Junkman. exe's form was so eaten away at this point that the only thing that could possibly be holding him together was his own willpower, and a stubborn refusal to lie down and die, but he still retained enough strength to reach one mostly dissolved clamp hand to Protoman. exe's restraints and begin squeezing.

A cracking sound was heard as the restraints began to give way.

"D...Dark...C...Cann...on..." was all the warning received before the navi in Junkman. exe's grip blasted his captor with the full force of the DarkChip. When the dust cleared over half of Junkman. exe's remaining body was simply gone. But his one remaining eye gleamed with strength and purpose as the clamp on Protoman. exe's restraints continued squeezing, and the one holding the Nebula navi, despite not being connected to anything anymore, squeezed as well.

"G...g..."

"DarkLaser..." a deep voice intoned and a purple beam lanced through the clamp trying to free Protoman. exe, incinerating it completely.

Junkman. exe's one eye turned to take in the black-bodied form of the newcomer highlighted with glowing blue lines before another blast destroyed what little form he had left.

"Such a waste..." Laserman. exe intoned as the digital dust floated away, looking out over the great scar the navi's charge had carved into the undernet. "A being born of the Darkness that rejected it so..."

"You'll never win..." Protoman. exe growled out as he struggled against his weakened restraints.

"But we shall," Laserman. exe returned calmly as he waved his hand and repaired the bindings even as his underling got to his feet. "Those who had given themselves over to Darkness shall return, and those who had not are easily replaced. And without your NetOp interfering, your hate and rage will fuel your DarkSoul properly, giving us a powerful new ally. Watch him," Laserman. exe instructed the one remaining member of Nebula from the original force. "Make sure nothing else interferes."

"Of course, Lord Laserman," the HeelNavi bowed respectfully.

Back in his hotel room, Chaud stared at the static on his PET's display and tried his best not to weep.

It had taken a while for the officials to find where Seijin had been broadcasting from, but it wasn't like the man had been going anywhere anytime soon. There hadn't even been a real sense of triumph as he was led away in a straightjacket, still laughing hysterically, just a sad feeling of wasted potential.

As if that weren't enough, Lan had heard some hushed whispers from a few of the tournament organizers. He only caught a few words, but one of those had been Chaud's name and that gave him a rather sinking feeling.

He'd tried to contact his rival/friend, only to find out that Chaud was blocking all messages, which really didn't help the feeling.

In the interests of taking his mind off of matters, he decided to go to his hotel room (followed by Yai, Dex, and Mayl who he was reasonably sure couldn't have been talked out of it with a loaded tank) and look into the latest on the Red Sun tournament. Raoul and Thunderman. exe had lost in the semifinals, which Lan was a bit disappointed by, but the match between Raika and Sherrice had

been scheduled about the same time as his own bout with Mr. Famous.

Entering his room, Lan and the others were rather surprised to see Chaud already there, sitting on Lan's hotel bed and watching the Red Sun results as he patiently waited.

"–and her navi Rideman defeated Raika and Searchman in an astounding upset today when Rideman unleashed a never-before-seen Style Change."

Footage on the television showed Rideman. exe twisting from a cowboy themed-navi into some manner of dark, sinister, bipedal equine before charging Searchman. exe and kicking the military navi hard enough in the torso that he practically folded in half.

"Damn!" Dex whistled, wide-eyed. "What kinda Style Change is that?!"

"I don't know," Yai sniffed, "but it's hardly what I'd call stylish..."

Lan and Mayl on the other hand were more focused on the guest present.

"Hi Chaud," Mayl began politely, "what brings you here?"

"Is something wrong?" Lan blurted out in a fairly insightful, if tactless, manner.

"Lan!" Mayl admonished.

"Hmph..." Chaud snorted. "I suspect you already know, Lan..."

"Er..." Lan hesitated for a moment and thought on it. "So... Junkman or DarkSoul?"

"Interestingly enough, both," Chaud admitted eyeing Lan purposefully as he blinked in surprise.

"Okay... I really wasn't expecting that answer..."

"Nnnnnngghhh!" Protoman grit his teeth as the darkness within him struggled ever harder to emerge and take over. "L-l-l... Ch-chaud..."

"Hehehe... Just stop fighting it..." the blackened HeelNavi watching over him chuckled. "You've cost us a lot of my comrades so far, but we don't hold a grudge... You know why? Because those who are strong always turn to the dark in the end... Now go on... release the DarkPower within you... Become the ultimate killing machine! Heeheehee!"

"So Protoman and Junkman were having their match outside the tournament schedule when a bunch of Nebula's goons showed up and abducted him?" Lan repeated, just to make sure that he'd heard that right.

"Yes," Chaud nodded.

"And this didn't involve your PET spontaneously flying across the room and jacking Protoman in under its own power?"

"No..." Chaud blinked as he processed the odd statement. The other occupants of the room weren't far behind him. "Though considering how little is known about DarkPower, I suppose something like that wouldn't be *quite* outside the realm of possibility."

"Eh, Lan thinks weird thoughts like that all the time," Dex dismissed. "Like when he thought Higsby had a crush on Miss Mari."

"Uh, Dex...?" Mayl hesitated as Yai facepalmed. "Mr. Higsby *does* have a crush on Miss Mari..."

"What?! Why doesn't anyone tell me these things?!"

"Anyway..." Lan sweatdropped as he tried to get the topic back on track. "Junkman offered to help get Protoman back, but was deleted on the way..."

"Essentially," Chaud nodded in confirmation of the very brief summary of what happened.

"All because Protoman's struggling with a DarkSoul because you used a DarkChip..."

"It was against over five hundred of Nebula's forces before you took down Shademan, but yes," Chaud gazed back levelly. "It is not something I am proud of. Such weakness is inexcusable."

"And you want our help getting him back?" Lan cut off the building questions he could feel the others burning to ask. "Not that I'm refusing, but why us?"

"Because you and Megaman have a habit of pulling through where others might not," Chaud allowed.

Lan sighed as he took that in before picking up his PET and simply handing it to Chaud.

"Lan!" Mayl gasped as Yai and Dex both sucked in breaths of surprise as well.

"What are you–?" Chaud blinked. "Megaman is your navi..."

"And Protoman's yours," Lan countered firmly. "Now go get him back."

"Aw, yeah!" Dex grinned and pounded his fist into his palm. "Time to go bash some bad guys!"

"Now wait a second–" Chaud began.

"Chaud," Lan interrupted, "every minute you spend arguing with them over this is another minute Protoman's in Nebula's clutches."

"...Oh, all right..."

"Hephaestus's office, Herfjötur speaking."

"..."

"I'm sorry, I don't want any free bustline enlargement. I and my shield-sisters are perfectly happy with the size of our b–"

"..."

"Aphrodite, I'm really tired of this right now, so I'll make you a deal: Hang up *immediately* and don't call this number again until after Heph's current activation attempt is over and the three of us won't extract your pathetic excuse for reproductive organs out through your nose."

click

"Yeah, that's what I thought." (50)

"Damn..." Chaud swore as the group of navis encountered a heavy sealed door barring the way deeper into the undernet. "This is going to be a problem..."

"No worries," Lan smiled, "after all they probably left a key lying around somewhere so their other members could get in."

"Yes, but where is the question," Chaud shot back.

"Well, if it was me, I'd have put it–"

BOOM-CRASH

Chaud and Lan blinked before turning to the display which showed a rather thoroughly mangled former door and a smug Gutsman. exe dusting his hands off.

"Or we could do that..." Chaud blinked again before considering Dex. "Just what did you customize your navi with, again?"

"A bunch of strength boosters and terrain cracking programs as the base," Dex smirked. "Heck, Gutsman's probably the only geddon-element navi on the net!" (51)

"You totally made that up," Yai frowned.

"So what if I did?" Dex shot back angrily. "No one else I've ever heard of has done that with a navi, so I should be able to call it whatever I want!"

"We're wasting time..." Chaud cut the brewing argument off before it could gain momentum.

"Eighteen plus strength boosters means never having to say 'it's locked'," Apollo nodded sagely as the group continued on.

"Holy..." Hub muttered as he spied the gigantic scar carved across the terrain in front of the group. "Did... Did Junkman do *that* ?!"

"With some help from the forces of Nebula," Chaud confirmed.

"Damn..." Dex and Gutsman. exe added together.

"On the upside, that means there's far fewer Nebula navis left to stop us at this point, tho–"

"Hey! What are you four doing down here?!" someone yelled, causing Hub, Roll. exe, Gutsman. exe, and Glide. exe to turn and see roughly a dozen blackish navis of varying generic types running up to them.

"We're here for Protoman," Roll. exe stated firmly.

"Yes, so if you would kindly step aside," Glide. exe added politely.

"Step asi...? Who the hell do you think we are?! We survived the thing that caused this level of devastation! Don't think you four chumps are taking one more step! Get 'em!"

The dozen navis began to charge, only to be brought up short as a bunch of Rockcubes appeared in their way.

"Are you certain about this course of action?" Glide. exe asked.

"Of course," Chaud's voice conveyed his certainty. "Junkman left a little something of himself behind after all."

A moment later and an avatar of the massive mismatched junk navi appeared, glaring sinisterly with his glowing yellow eyes and the Nabula navis backed up a step or two each.

"Ohgeezohgeezohgeez..."

"The hell?! He's *dead* ! I saw Lord Laserman off him myself!"

The Rockcubes all levitated into the air before shooting at the gathered Nebula members amidst a great deal of panicked screaming.

"Hehehehehe..." the blackened HeelNavi chuckled as he watched Protoman. exe struggle against his bindings. "Your transformation is about ninety percent complete at this point... Soon... Soon you will be one of us!"

"Nnnnnnngghhh...! N-n-neverrrrraaarrgh!"

"Hehehe... That's what they all say at first!"

"Protoman!" a familiar voice called out, causing the HeelNavi to turn around. "Release him now!"

Through the darkening haze in his vision, Protoman. exe beheld four new navis racing towards his position. They seemed mildly familiar,

save for the one in blue. He knew that navi...

Delete him... DELETE!

"Rrrrgh!"

"Oh, you want him back?" the blackened HeelNavi was saying. "You sure you wouldn't like something else? How about a nice VIRUS MOB!"

Protoman. exe watched as a mass of viruses leaped out at the navis, only to be deleted moments later under a barrage of various assaults. Save for the brown one, they hardly seemed winded.

"Pathetic..." a voice Protoman. exe was sure he knew scoffed at the HeelNavi. "Is that the best you have to offer?"

Abandoned... Left to rot... He never cared about you...

"SHUT UP!" the HeelNavi spat indignantly. "I'll show you what happens to those that mess with Nebula!"

"rrrrraaaAGH!" Protoman. exe roared in anger and confusion as the HeelNavi undid his restraints, leaving him to fall kneeling to the ground.

"Protoman! You're free now! It's time to unleash your inner Darkness and show them your true self! Terminate them all!"

Delete... DELETE!

Yes... He would delete them all... Starting with *that* one...

The four navis jumped back from his sudden slash.

"Amazing..." the HeelNavi breathed in awe. "I never even saw him..." the words trailed off as the HeelNavi wondered why the world was tilting so when his feet were firmly planted on the ground as his top half slid off his bottom half, "move..."

"Everyone get back!" the blue navi called. "There's no telling what he'll do like this!"

"GrrrrrAGH!"

"Don't worry," that familiar voice stated calmly. "I know exactly what to do. Just follow my lead."

"Of course," the blue navi nodded without hesitation.

Delete them! Delete! DELETE!

"De...lete..." he groaned out, that one thought drowning out even his identity as the Darkness took hold. Glaring at the blue navi, he swung his sword...

...and was surprised motionless as the blade was stopped dead between the blue navi's hands.

"Rrrrrr..." he growled as he tried to pull his blade back and failed.

"Protoman!" the voice called out. "You can't cut me with your soul so clouded! Wake up! Hear me and dispel the darkness that holds you in its grip!"

Pah! You cannot be rid of the darkness so easily! Empty words!

"Grrr..."

"Chaud, we need more to get through to him!" the blue navi called out as he struggled to keep his grip on the blade. "Synch with me so I can act as a conduit between you two!"

"Of..." the voice seemed surprised, though why escaped him in that moment, "of course... Ready!"

"Let's do this!" the blue navi cried out as he began glowing. The glow extended to his blade the blue navi held tight and down towards his body, bringing sensations at once painful and familiar. A boy with

white and black hair, dressed in camo pants and a red vest over a black shirt. Endless training and pain that both shared. He knew this person... The one he'd sworn to never betray, no matter what...

No! You belong to the darkn..s! Yo. .re p..t o. .t fo..ve. ...

"Gaaahhhhh!" he yelled out as the darkness hovering over his mind was forced back. Back into the deepest recesses of his soul where it belonged. "Ungh... L...Lord Chaud...? Is that...?"

"It's me Protoman... Welcome back... Time to jack out, now. We've got a lot to talk about and a finals match to prepare for..."

"Okay Apollo, whatever you had on Zeus worked, so we've got clearance to..." Hephaestus trailed off as he spotted what had been done to his office in the very short time he'd been gone. Red and blue streamers hung on everything. Everything. Posters of one of two, or both, teams of armored humanoids were plastered on practically every flat surface, their faces pasted over with the likenesses of Lan, Hub, Chaud, and Protoman. exe. And in the center of the room, a proud banner declared 'Red vs Blue'.

Hephaestus's eye twitched.

"Oh, hey bro!" Apollo greeted with his face painted half red and half blue like some demented mortal at a sporting event. "Do you like what the incredible Apollo has done for the mighty Lan and Megaman's match with the amazing Chaud and Protoman?"

"What do you even *see* in that branch?"

"It is one of the few places still capable of surprising the gifted Apollo with any regularity."

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the NAXA announcer called out to the gathered crowd. "The battle you've been waiting for! The showdown

between the two Electopian representatives for the Blue Moon championship! Both are still young, but they've each battled world class opponents to reach where they are now! Here they are! The legendary child prodigy of the Electopian Officials... Eugene Chaud and his navi Protoman!"

The crowd proceeded to go nuts as the boy entered with a confident stride.

"And the grandson of the man credited as the father of Net Society, Lan Hikari and his navi Megaman!"

The crowd went berserk as Lan skated into the arena to join Chaud at the battlecomp.

"I hope you don't expect me to go easy on you," Chaud smirked at Lan.

"As if!" Lan grinned right back.

"Who will the fates smile upon today? Eugene Chaud or Lan Hikari? NetBattlers ready? Battle routine, set!"

Hub and Protoman. exe stared each other down from across the projected digital battlefield and spoke together.

"Execute!"

"Aw, yeah!" Dex cheered as both navis blurred forward and clashed LifeSwords together as their opening move. "This is gonna be AWESOME!"

The scene in Tamako's small home was quite a bit livelier than the young woman was used to, but she had no complaints. Her precious nephew was not only over to visit, but he'd actually brought friends with him. It was such a momentous occasion that it warranted

everything in her power to make it happen. That they all just wanted to watch the Blue Moon finals was perfect, since that's what she'd been planning on doing herself.

"Go Master Lan!" Kai yelled at the display, his navi Turboman. exe right there with him.

"Go Protoman you sexy beast you!" the Mary girl's navi Ring. exe counter-cheered at the top of her lungs, the girl herself joining in with a much more sedate voice and a not insubstantial blush.

"Looks like Mamoru's gotten some good friends, eh Tamako?" Metalman. exe asked with a fondness that anyone else would be surprised to know he possessed.

"Yeah, looks like," Tamako smiled with a similarly secret fondness as her nephew joined the Kai boy in cheering for Lan. Personally, she was rooting for Chaud, but then he was the guy she'd lost to in the Eagle tournament.

Chaud smirked at his grinning opponent as Protoman. exe and Megaman. exe clashed sword chip on sword chip for a few more passes. "Good to see you haven't slacked off, Lan. But what do you say we take this to the next level? Protoman!"

"Roger!" Protoman. exe got into a stance Lan and Megaman. exe had only ever seen once before, but from the looks on their faces they knew exactly what was in store.

"BattleChips in!" Lan hurriedly sent chip data to his navi. "Down–"

"Delta!" Protoman. exe yelled as he dashed forwards, the first slash clanging off a hastily raised Guard chip. "Ray!" the second slash obliterated a Barrier that had also been raised rather quickly. "Edge!"

'...funny, that last one met much less resistance than expected,' Protoman. exe thought as instead of striking the final stance to

match the appearance of the triangular Delta character around his opponent, he whipped around and parried a giant shuriken that had been aimed for his back, spotting the bisected dummy fading away. *'Ah, AntiDamage...'*

"Damn..." Megaman. exe cursed good-naturedly as he landed back on the ground and met Protoman. exe's shaded gaze.

"Very impressive..." Protoman. exe allowed. "Not many can do that."

"Heh..." Megaman. exe chuckled. "Back at you."

"Very well, it seems I'll need to try something new," Chaud didn't lower his smirk for a moment as he selected five very specific alterations to his folder. "Geddon1, BattleChip in! PanelShoot 1, 2, and 3, Experimental Chips in! Junkman, Navi Chip in! Download!"

"Program Advance!" Protoman. exe declared strongly as the massive avatar of the junk data navi appeared and raised his clamp-tipped arms high into the air, eyes glowing brightly as the entire cyberscape cracked loudly and every single Panel in the battlecomp rose into the air, including the ones the competitors were standing on. "Geddon Storm!"

And then the Panels began whirling around the cyberscape in a deadly chaotic dance.

"Oh, my, it looks like 'Reverse Style' Rideman is on the ropes, folks!" the representative from the Sharo Space Center announced.

"Grr..." Sherrice growled as she took in the identical stoic expressions of her opponent and his navi. "We're not done yet! Do it Rideman! Unleash the ancient power of Mu!"

The dark-colored bipedal equine navi gave a loud whinny as he began to emit an immense power from within.

"What's this? Rideman is undergoing another transformation? What will he become this ti–BOZHE MOY!" (52)

A monstrously distorted equine bellow was heard amidst the sudden digital interference along all lines of transmission.

"Cut the broadcast!"

"I can't believe I'm seeing this!" Yai gaped as Megaman. exe and Protoman. exe leaped from flying Panel to flying Panel in a deadly dance that most navis would have been deleted even attempting.

"I can't believe I'm *keeping up* with it!" Mayl's eyes were wide as she found herself understanding the kinds of maneuvers required of navi and operator alike to perform the insane acrobatics being displayed in front of the cheering audience. Understanding... and feeling certain she could perform them herself if needed. *'Is this really what it's like for those two all the time?'*

"GUTSSOUL!" Megaman. exe's shout heralded a shaking of the already abused cyberscape right before he opened up with the rapid-fire GutBuster, blasting away at flying panels and his opponent alike, thinning the deadly storm of projectiles in his counterattack.

"YEAH! THAT'S IT LAN!" Dex howled. "SHOW EVERYONE THE POWER OF GUTS!"

"Holleeee..." whistled a tall thin man with blond hair, red-tinted sunglasses, and a pilot's jacket tied around his waist under his blue t-shirt. "That's the rival you were talking about in our exhibition match?"

"Yep! That's the only guy we've never been able to beat, Charlie!"

"Huh..." Charlie stroked his chin as he continued watching the match. "I just might have to take a trip to Electopia sometime soon..."

Sherrice felt herself shed tears as her opponent was flown off in a helicopter to an unknown destination. Even as she herself was restrained and taken away, her navi Rideman. exe confiscated.

'I... I failed you, my ancestors...'

Protoman. exe grit his teeth as the SuperVulcan attack ended. Between that and the invincible rapid-fire ability of 'GutsSoul's' buster, the damage was beginning to add up.

"Hang in there, Protoman," Chaud instructed him calmly. "If I know Lan and Megaman, then this should handle things. AntiFire, AntiAqua, AntiElec, AntiWood..."

"Hey, thanks!" Lan shot back. "Now I know what not to use! M-Cannon, triple download!"

"Program Advance!" Megaman. exe grinned in his current yellow and red armor as the giant cannon formed and pointed straight at Protoman. exe through a gap in the Geddon Storm.

"AntiAdvance..." Protoman. exe intoned firmly as he felt the experimental fusion occur.

"Giga–Anti *What?!* " Megaman. exe realized in shock just a hair too late to stop himself from firing.

"Dr. Regal, the winner of the Red Sun tournament is on his way to the Sharo Space Center as you requested. From the looks of things, the Blue Moon finals should be concluding shortly."

"Excellent. Have the winner brought here as soon as possible after the match finishes."

The four elemental blasts lanced forth unerringly and Megaman. exe was knocked out of his GutsSoul form as several of the flying Panels around him were obliterated.

"NaviRecycle!" Chaud yelled as the Giga-class chip was slotted in, summoning the digital avatar of Junkman. exe once more to rain many of the remaining flying Panels down on Megaman. exe's location.

"Invisible!" Lan countered as Megaman. exe vanished, the Panels impacting fruitlessly where he'd just been. "Recover300!"

"Tch..." Chaud and Protoman. exe chastised themselves. Megaman. exe had clearly survived due to the UnderShirt/UnderShot program just like they'd expected, but the follow-up attack just hadn't been fast enough. They kept dodging their opponent's charged buster shots while waiting for him to reappear.

'There...' they both thought as one as the navi reappeared.

"Recover 150! Sacrifice for Unison Chip! BattleChips in and download!"

"StepCross!"

"ROLLSOU–ARGH!" Megaman. exe cried out as the double-slash interrupted his form shift and he nearly fell off his perch as Protoman. exe sailed past, twisting to land among one of the few remaining clusters of flying Panels.

"It's over!" Chaud yelled as he directed Protoman. exe to rebound for another pass.

"P-PitHockey..." the barely-hanging-on Megaman. exe grunted out as he flung the Program Advance straight at the oncoming Protoman. exe at just the right angle.

Chaud's and Protoman. exe's eyes widened, unable to dodge the oncoming attack. The ricocheting projectile of death landed perfectly over and over until the inevitable happened.

"Protoman... deleted! Lan and Megaman are the Blue Moon champions!"

"Huh..." Chaud sighed heavily as the cheers died down. "You really have improved, Lan... I can honestly say that this time wasn't a fluke. But don't get comfortable. The next time we meet, it won't be so easy."

"Looking forward to it!" Lan just smiled back.

"Me too," Megaman. exe said after he jacked out of the devastated cyberscape. "I think I understand you two a little better now. The hell you put yourselves through to get better and stay at the top of your game. To protect all those that need protecting. It's truly inspiring."

Chaud barely stopped his eyes from widening at the blue navi's words. While many had guessed at the length of his training schedule, none had ever realized the contents of it. Particularly the self-inflicted torture that had been necessary to generate the darkness-fueled Muramasa Style. The kind of hell he'd promised himself never to inflict on Protoman. exe ever again, down to swearing that they'd get strong enough to never need the style no matter the opponent.

'Is... is this the DoubleSoul ability that Dr. Hikari mentioned? Is it not just the power to channel another navi's abilities, but the power to understand them as well?'

"And we'll be stronger next time as well!" Lan promised.

"Tch... You'd better," Chaud snorted as he began walking down the steps towards the exit, even as he heard the approach of a helicopter. He heard the NAXA announcer telling Lan to quickly climb

into the helicopter as he left. *'Lan... Megaman... I hope you can handle what's waiting for you... Whatever it is...'*

"Aw, man, that helicopter show was awesome!" Kai cheered as the newscasters began discussing the match in retrospect. "Master Lan is the best!"

"Aww..." Ring. exe pouted. "Protoman lost... And we're too far away to go comfort him..."

"Ring..." Mary rolled her eyes.

"You think Master Lan and Master Megaman are off to face the winner of that Red Sun tournament now?" Turboman. exe pondered.

"Maybe..." Mamoru allowed quietly as he thought on things. *'Then again, the tournament officials seemed rather in a hurry for it to be just a special match being planned. I think there may be more to this than anyone is being told...'* "Mistman?"

"Yes, Lord Mamoru?" one of the current joint holders of Rank 3, on assignment from Serenade. exe to aid and protect the undernet administrator while his counterpart Bowlman. exe took on rank challengers, replied just as quietly as the rest of the room continued being rather loud.

"I want you to look into this... Put Bowlman and the lower ranks on alert as well. I feel something may be happening soon..."

"You'll be told the details when you arrive. For now, just climb into the helicopter as quickly as possible."

"I'm from Netopia's space monitoring center, NAXA, the same place we're headed to now. All you need to know at the moment is that our planet is in great peril and you may be the only one who can help us."

"So this is NAXA..." Lan muttered as he allowed himself to be led through the high tech complex. It looked exactly like he and Hub had expected it to. The very same as in their... Loop memories? Was that how Django put it, or were those supposed to be what he got after Waking Up in a new 'Loop'? *'I better ask Hub later... Even though he'll probably chew me out for not paying better attention...'*

"Yes..." the NAXA lady, whose name Lan didn't recall catching, replied as she hurried him through doors and hallways. "You'd best prepare yourself. A giant asteroid is headed for a direct impact with our planet. We have a plan to stop it, but we require your strength, Lan."

"So... that's what the tournament was about? To find the best NetOp for the job?"

"In short, yes. Despite the relative crudeness, it was the best way we had available to us in the time allotted and the necessary secrecy to keep the populace from panicking and causing even more problems. The calculated impact time may be days from now, but in astrological terms, we're cutting it perilously close as it is. Ah, we're here... Here he is, the winner of the Blue Moon tournament, Lan Hikari."

Lan watched as one person in particular jumped in surprise at the mention of his name and whip around to look straight at him. That person being Lan's father.

"Lan...? I was told the winner was from Electopia, but..."

"Heh... Hi dad," Lan waved with an awkward smile. "I hear you've been shooting at asteroids?"

"Yes, but the laser plan failed," another scientist fidgeted nervously, "so we've come up with a new plan... or at least Dr. Regal has... Won't you tell us what it is now, doctor?"

"Of course," the man at the head of the room, a man with a smile and bearing that bespoke of nothing less than utter confidence,

impeccably dressed with nary a wrinkle to be seen and a monocle perched over one eye framed by his dark hair. "I suppose that it is a sign of good fortune that he is your son, Dr. Hikari."

Lan's dad had a stony expression, but Lan caught the momentary look of suspicion in his father's eyes.

"Yes, he's a very talented boy."

"Indeed," Dr. Regal's proud smile didn't waver for an instant, "you must be very proud. It is nice to meet you, Lan. I am Dr. Regal, a mere scientist."

'Wow...' Lan thought as he did his best to keep his reaction under control, *'knowing what I do, his attempt at humility makes me want to punch the guy...'* "N...Nice to meet you..."

"Now, let me explain why you were brought here..." Dr. Regal continued as Lan walked next to the other scientists. "You see, the reason we had you brought here, in fact the reason why we searched for the best NetBattlers in the world, is because my plan requires the best navis and operators, who can maintain their elite level of ability in even the most grueling circumstances. To this end, we held two world-wide NetBattle tournaments..."

"Blue Moon and Red Sun," Lan interrupted, nodding. "What? I saw the coverage on the other. It was kind of a big deal after all."

"Indeed, then you have likely heard of the other winner, even now at the Sharo Space Center to analyze and maintain the flow of important data. They should be coming online with us... now, fact."

The monitor behind Dr. Regal flickered and resolved into a view of another room, with a particular person standing at attention in the front that Lan found much more familiar than he otherwise should have.

"Hey Baryl!" Lan greeted cheerfully before he could stop himself.

"Do a Baryl roll! A Baryl roll!" Apollo shouted while laughing hysterically.

"I think Hub might object to you shipping his girlfriend with someone else," Hephaestus smirked.

"What?!" Apollo began to sputter indignantly. "But... The amazing Apollo would never...!"

"I hear you and Colonel had a little 'Trojan' trouble at the Red Sun finals?"

Baryl's eyes instantly sharpened and focused straight on Lan. "That is supposed to be classified..." the young man said dangerously. "How do you know about it?"

"Know about what?" Lan sweated nervously under Baryl's gaze. "I mean, it's just a joke... Rideman turns into a horse navi... 'Trojan horse', get it?"

"Hmph..." another voice huffed as the image of a mostly black navi with some parts white, red, and yellow along with a blue cape and a stern expression to match Baryl's appeared in a corner and considered Lan for a moment. A navi Lan readily recognized as Colonel. exe "It seems there has been no leak, Baryl. Merely a young boy's unfortunate attempt at humor..."

"As long as that's all it is," Baryl gave Lan one last glare.

'Hoo, boy... that was a close one...' Lan thought with relief.

"In any case, we have more important things to discuss, isn't that right Dr. Regal?" Baryl turned to the man in charge of the mystery operation.

"Indeed. For you see, the asteroid hurtling to our planet is in fact not natural."

"Not..." one scientist found his voice in the stunned silence sooner than the rest. "You mean... man-made? But... surely we'd have heard of a launch of this magnitude!"

"Not necessarily," Dr. Regal replied calmly. "I said it was not natural, not that it was made by human hands."

"But... Surely you don't mean to say that... An alien craft? Headed straight for us?"

"I couldn't believe it myself at first, despite being the one who took the readings while studying it. Not only is this asteroid artificial in origin, with accumulated debris built up from its long journey of course, it possesses a cyberworld. A cyberworld on a frequency compatible with our own, with some minor adjustments to the signal of course."

"But... where could it have come from?"

"The origin is not important now," Baryl cut in before Dr. Regal could. "What matters is that we stop it from impacting the planet."

"Indeed," Dr. Regal nodded. "The original laser weapon has been modified into a high powered transmitter. With you and the Sharo Space Center feeding NAXA the necessary info to keep a connection going, we will use it to send Lan's NetNavi into the asteroid's cyberworld..."

"Where he can gain control of its systems and alter its course..." Dr. Hikari finished after Dr. Regal's dramatic pause.

"Indeed," Dr. Regal confirmed. "Since navis are program data which is already sent all over the world wirelessly every day, the adjusted laser can easily send a navi into the asteroid's cyberworld."

"But it's far too dangerous!" Lan's dad protested.

"Of course," Dr. Regal admitted without missing a beat. "It is a dangerous mission to space where anything could go wrong. We could lose the navi and the entire planet would be smashed to pieces as a result. To even have a chance of success, the highest of operating skills will be crucial, both from the navi being sent and the one ensuring the integrity of data transmission from Sharo."

Baryl stood, if at all possible, even more at attention.

"Do you think you are not up to the task, Lan?"

"We're ready!" Lan and Hub declared as one before either could really consider what they were agreeing to, and who they were agreeing with.

"But Lan..." their father began to protest.

"Don't worry!" Lan grinned. "This is a job for a Hikari!"

"Excellent," Dr. Regal continued smiling confidently. "Tests on the navi transmitter are nearly completed. We'll need you as soon as they're finish–"

The monitor transmitting the meeting to the Sharo Space Center abruptly went to static. A moment later and red emergency lights began flashing as alarms blared.

"What's going on?!" Yai demanded of her private jet's pilot.

"I have no idea, miss Yai!" the man desperately tried to keep himself under control as he attempted to hail the airport again. "The connection to Electopia's net just suddenly went down! We have no way to get landing clearance!"

"Is the radio still working?" Yai demanded. "Do you remember how to use it, or are the low-tech emergency alternatives for *precisely this kind of scenario* too 'stone age' for you?" (53)

"Of course! I-I mean of course not! Getting right on that miss Yai!"

"What are these things?" Ring. exe gaped as she took in the ominous black devices with the sinister red protrusions blocking off the access points to outside networks.

"I don't know, but they're causing trouble!" Kai declared. "Let's do this like Master Lan would! Get ready Turboman!"

"You too Metalman!"

"Colonel! Get those jammers down! We have to be able to send the data to NAXA!"

"Understood, Baryl sir!" Colonel. exe reported as he slashed another virus to pieces.

"Nice shot," Protoman. exe allowed as a virus that had tried to jump him from behind was zapped into scattering bits.

"It was nothing," Thunderman. exe replied calmly as he took care of a few more of the troublesome entities that were guarding the devices. "I thought you and your operator would have been on the way home by now."

"We decided to stick around Netopia for a bit. Seems like it was a good thing we did."

"Indeed. This would be much more tedious by ourselves."

"Yamatoman..." Serenade. exe spoke with the weight of an order.

"Yes, Lo... Guardian Regent?" the samurai-themed former member of SciLabs' elite forces replied.

"You know that I am forbidden to leave unless an imminent threat to the entire net is underway, such as one of the sinister forces connected to the undernet breaking through the barriers that keep them at bay... However, the current situation demands some manner of response. So I am asking you to go in my place. Make certain that nothing... untoward is seeking to take advantage of this crisis to break out and then go aid the world's defenders in rectifying the problem. I am sure the current underking is already in the thick of things. If it becomes necessary, protect him as you would me."

"As you command... Serenade."

"Sir, I've managed to find what you asked. However, it seems that things are even worse than you feared. The only reason I was able to infiltrate Nation Z's network is because they are gearing up for a major operation. Practically every aspect of their network forces is a part of this undertaking. And there's more..."

"The syndicate known as Nebula has attacked all across the world! Communication lines all over the net have been disabled!"

Dr. Hikari grit his teeth as he considered things. Just what was the game here? Why sabotage the only means they had of diverting the asteroid?

"What can I do to help?"

"Very well. Leave things here to us scientists. Show us all how skilled you are. Jack into the nets across the world and repair the damage done by Nebula. So long as there is a problem with the net, then our plan cannot succeed. Here. Take this transmitter and install it into your PET. It will let us keep track of Megaman in case

something happens. Everyone else, back to your posts and make ready our plan!"

And now... Now Lan and Hub were involved. Much deeper than he ever wanted his sons to be...

"Lan, this is one of two Giga-class BattleChips I developed for the winners of the two tournaments. It should help you in the battles ahead."

He just wished he knew what Dr. Regal's game was... He was certain things were coming to a head now. The man's next move would likely make it all clear.

Lan wasn't sure why he couldn't jack in from NAXA, something about how they were unable to reach the jamming programs from inside the building's network, but he'd been driven to the closest off-site access point as fast as possible.

"Okay, Hub, let's get this show on the road! We've got to get the global network reconnected so we can save the world!"

"Let's do this!"

"Okay, Turboman! Let's open the way to Yumland!" Kai cheered.

"Of course, Kai! We'll–whoa..."

"What is it?" Mary asked as Ring. exe looked curiously at Turboman. exe while he pulled a strangely glowing object out of his inventory.

"Kai, remember when we got this from Yuko's dad?" Turboman. exe asked as he indicated the ghost-detecting CyberCrystal as it pulsed from blue to a deep angry red repeatedly.

"Yeah... is a ghost close by?"

"I... I don't think so..." Turboman. exe replied nervously. "I think it's past the barrier in Yumland actually..."

"Then how...?"

"Whoever it is is *very* powerful, and *very* angry..."

Navis of all types and affiliations cowered in the Yumland network as the great moan echoed everywhere.

"You... dare...!" the voice moaned as a great and ominous pressure gripped everything. "Nebula... You interrupt my duel... Capture my friend... Taint his soul... Deny me my peace... And now... you defile my home... I...! WILL...! NOT...! STAND...! FOR...! IT...!"

The jammers at all the cyber borders of Yumland creaked and groaned as the oppressive force focused on them, hauling with all its might as it ripped them from their place in the cyberscape and tore them across the Yumland network to smash together in a great ball of junk.

"Time to bust through!" Hub declared as he readied the Program Advance to cut down the next jammer. "Life–yikes!"

Only to have to abort and dive out of the way as a buzzsaw came through the device from the other side.

"Sorry, didn't see you there Megaman," the rough voice of Metalman. exe apologized as he stepped over the wreckage.

"No worries..." Hub allowed. "It's kind of hard to know what's on the other side of these things until they're down... Still, nice to see that others are working on the problem..."

"Heh... you don't know the half of it!" Tamako's voice spoke of the smirk she was certainly sporting.

Mistman. exe growled as he fended off the viruses the petty little Nebula navi kept throwing at him. He was certainly strong enough to delete such weak viruses with ease, but his cowardly opponent was summoning them as fast as they could be torn down in his drive to protect the jammer behind him.

"Having trouble?" a voice came over the private channel only accessible by Ranked navis.

"Some upstart's trying to overwhelm me with sheer numbers and making a decent go of it," Mistman. exe replied testily. "How are things on your end, Bowlman?"

"All of the lower Ranks have reported for duty, except for the current number 4."

"Ugh... Copyman's good for weeding out the endless parade of challengers, but he's so unreliable otherwise... Probably pulling another impersonation scam again..."

"Well," a culturedly sinister voice cut in as a new navi joined the scene. One who floated above the ground with a tall lithe form, wicked claws, large bat-like ears, and a confident fanged smirk. "This seems to be quite the party..."

"Lord Shademan!" the Nebula navi seemed emboldened by the other's presence.

"Indeed. You seem to be having trouble with this lone navi..."

"My apologies, Lord Shademan, but he is far stronger than most of the blind sheep," the virus summoner hastened to clarify, "but with you here, things will be different! He'll have no chance at all!"

"He-he-he... Yes... Our opponent doesn't stand a chance at all..." the vampiric navi chuckled, right before shoving his clawed hand through the back of the Nebula member's torso. "Do you?"

"L-l-lord Sh-shade...man...?" the Nebula navi asked in confused shock. Mistman. exe was feeling rather shocked himself.

"I'm afraid your precious 'Lord Shademan' caught a rather terminal case of sunlight poisoning recently... It made impersonating him for this debacle so very simple though..."

The Nebula navi wavered and dissipated as his data was deleted, leaving the vampiric form to waver and resolve into a very simple netnavi body type. One that was almost completely off-white save for a solid green navi symbol in the center of the chest and again in the middle of the head like a single great eye.

"Copyman..." Mistman. exe identified the individual.

"Yes," Copyman. exe confirmed. "I know you and Bowlman don't think much of me. I know I'm not one of the truly strong, but with my ability to borrow the powers of any navi I see, I'm no slouch either. I'm more a survivor than a fighter, but I also know what side my bread is buttered on, to borrow a human phrase. I don't want the world coming down around my ears any more than most."

"Well, then, let's get back to work..."

"That's another one down!" Gutsman. exe cheered as the jammer blew up.

"Indeed," Glide. exe agreed, "at this rate we will have all of Electopia reconnected in no time."

"Yep!" Roll. exe chirped. "Now let's... hold on... I'm getting a message... It's from Lan's dad!"

"Really?" Mayl nearly pressed her face into her PET in her eagerness. "What does it say?"

"Hold on a moment... It says..."

"Heh... You refused Laserman's invitation and instead have become a menace to our organization! Because of that... I have to delete you!"

"BlueMoon, Giga Chip in! Download!" Lan yelled right before the shimmering blue satellite appeared over Hub's head and rained its beam down on the Nebula navi he was facing. The one apparently in control of all the jamming devices still active across the world.

"Guh...!" the navi grunted as the hit forced him to his knees. "You may... have... gotten me... but... our leader's... mighty plan... is... now in motion... The asteroid... is ours...!"

"The asteroid?!" Hub blurted in shock, despite expecting that claim. "What the heck could you possibly do with it anyway?"

"Heh... Our plan of Darkness... is nearly complete..." the navi raised his arms into the air and Hub felt his power levels spike dangerously. He was going to overload himself in a suicide attack... and the jack-out prevention was still running! "Die... wondering...! Y–urk..."

A spear suddenly sprouted out of the navi's chest even as a slew of Barrier-protected forms interposed themselves between Hub and the former member of Nebula.

"Heh..." Turboman. exe chuckled from inside one of the barriers. "Looks like we all had the same idea!"

"Yep!" Gutsman. exe agreed wholeheartedly from within his own. Next to the two in their own Barriers were Ring. exe, Roll. exe, and Glide. exe.

"Indeed," Yamatoman. exe nodded as he removed his spear from the rapidly dissipating body of the Nebula navi. "Success is always desired, but it is heartening to see that things were well in hand regardless."

"Well, it's great that Megaman's okay," Ring. exe cut in, "but what now? Are they going to try and send someone else after him?"

"Actually," Lan spoke as he found the transmitter program on his PET and considered his options, "I was thinking we might just let them think it worked."

"Oh no..." Regal declared with as much despair as anyone had ever heard from the man, "the transmitter I gave Lan has stopped sending its signal."

"But... that means..." another scientist began even as Dr. Hikari's stomach lodged in his throat.

'Hub... No...'

"Yes... It means Lan's navi has, through whatever means... been deleted."

"B-but... the plan to send a navi to the asteroid..."

"Can't even be attempted without him... No... I knew it was too much for someone his age... We're finished..."

"Not so..." Dr. Regal interrupted, his voice regaining its usual confidence. "There is still one more option. We can send another navi instead. It's too late to change the main plan."

"But... We don't have time to search for another top NetBattler..."

'This is it, Dr. Regal... What's your game?'

"...We'll send my navi."

Mass confusion lit the room on all faces save Dr. Regal's and Dr. Hikari's.

"I may not be as good as Lan, but I am a NetBattler. Are there any who object to this approach?"

'So that's what you've been after all along...'

"Um... the network is back up, huh..." Higsby sweatdropped, mirrored by Numberman. exe online, as he watched the navi of his former ally continue blasting away at the Nebula members even as most of them ran screaming, in pain, or both.

"Who cares?!" Mr. Match growled out. "These posers cut the international connection right in the middle of a live stream of my favorite show! They'll pay for that out of their hides! Keep going Fireman! Burn them to ash! No mercy for Nebula! Bwahahahahahaha!"

"Come on! You heard the man! Burn!" the flame navi yelled as he set another member of Nebula on fire.

"Step on it! We have to get back to NAXA ASAP!"

"I'm driving as fast as the law allows, kid! You're acting like the world might end!"

"Did no one tell you that I was an integral part of stopping an alien craft encased in enough stellar debris to classify as a giant asteroid from crashing into the planet?"

"Say what?! You can't be serious!"

"..."

"I hope you're strapped in, kiddo. I always wanted an excuse to do this..."

Lan had barely kept his footing as he'd bailed from the vehicle before it even came to a complete stop and barrelled into the NAXA building at full tilt.

"Adjustments have been completed," Dr. Regal noted as he began starting up the giant-laser-turned-giant-transmitter. "We will now prepare to send my navi. As large voltages will be generated, I ask that everyone else please move down to the lower platform."

"Yes, you're right," the female head of NAXA sighed. "Good luck."

All the other scientists began descending to the lower roof platform. All except one.

"Is something the matter, Dr. Hikari?" Dr. Regal asked with good-humored patience.

"I just needed to see your expression," Dr. Hikari glared at the man. "The way the first plan failed at precisely the wrong moment... The way you proposed the navi plan almost immediately after... The conveniently timed attack that necessitated the selected navi and NetOp to put themselves in harm's way... And when the selected navi vanished, and everyone was in a panic, you instantly volunteered yours, knowing that everyone would be too desperate to consider your motives for doing so... It's all worked out perfectly for you, hasn't it?"

"Precisely what are you getting at...?" Dr. Regal's smile didn't waver for a moment.

"What exactly do you need the asteroid for, Dr. Regal... leader of the DarkChip syndicate Nebula!"

"Heh heh heh..." Dr. Regal began chuckling as Dr. Hikari did his best to glare a hole in the man. "Hahahahahaaa! Well spotted, Dr. Hikari! However did you piece it together?"

"My navi's not too shabby either," Dr. Hikari declared. "He infiltrated Nation Z's network and found everything. The core of Nebula's ranks for both the human and cyber worlds. The centers for DarkChip production. All your plans. How much did you have to accelerate things to take advantage of this?"

"Quite a bit, actually," Dr. Regal kept his confident grin in place. "So many things rushed before their intended time to fit this development, but how will knowing all this help you? Will you stop me? Stopping me won't prevent the approach of the asteroid."

"No, but sending me will," a voice declared from Dr. Hikari's PET.

"Heh..." Dr. Regal met Dr. Hikari's glare with his casually confident gaze. "You don't have a shred of hope..."

The roof-access elevator chose that moment to ding. The doors opened and a young form darted out, drawing everyone's attention as they turned to see who it was. "Hey dad!" Lan yelled as he skated through the other scientists and past the upwards ramp. "I got your note! Hub's on his way!"

"Hey, that's the generator! You can't jack into that!"

"Oh, and look out behind you dad!"

Dr. Hikari turned around at the warning just in time to see Dr. Regal's PET crash into the side of his head before he lost consciousness.

"Oh, come on! Foul!" Apollo yelled.

"You seemed fond of Lan when he did something similar."

"Yeah, but the mighty Lan wasn't the *bad guy* !" Apollo defended indignantly.

"Dad!" Lan yelled as he watched his father collapse just like he remembered from before.

"Hmm... I'd hoped to be a bit more dramatic about this, but oh well," Dr. Regal smirked as he pressed a button, causing explosives at either end of the ramp connecting the upper and lower roof platforms to detonate and send it plummeting downwards. "My friends, it is I, Dr. Regal, leader of the DarkChip syndicate Nebula! Today, I shall claim ownership of the asteroid and use it to fuel a world of Darkness!"

"N-N-Nebula?" a scientist who apparently hadn't heard Dr. Hikari's accusations clearly stammered. "Again?"

"So you're the one who's behind everything!" Lan yelled.

"Everything is a bit of a stretch," Dr. Regal smiled tolerantly. "After all, I am not responsible for the existence of the asteroid. Only what happens to it from now on... In fact, leader of Nebula or even of Nation Z sounds so dated now... Today, as I wield the asteroid's power, I shall be known as master of the world! A pure evil world! A world with no law, no borders, and no right or wrong! No one can stop me now as I execute our true desire, the Plan of Darkness!"

"We'll stop you!" Lan declared loudly as Dr. Regal ignored him and calmly approached the laser-transmitter control panel.

"Go, Laserman! Take the asteroid!"

"Stop Lan! That generator is charged to dangerously high voltage!"

"Jack in, Laserman! Execute!"

"It's time for Megaman... IN SPACE-Space-space..."

"Do you really have to do the whole fake echo thing?"

"How else is the dramatic Apollo supposed to make it sound right?"

"Hold it right there, Laserman!" Hub yelled as he finally caught up with the other navi just outside what they'd both concluded was the control center for the alien network.

"So, we meet again, Megaman," the darkloid navi of Dr. Regal intoned, his one glowing eye pulsing in time with his words. "So close to the ultimate prize as well... I'll ask you again, will you wield your DarkPower with us in the syndicate? I shall remind you that you have but two choices: Join me and rule the world, or be torn limb from limb until no programmer could ever restore you."

"Are you still on about that?!" Hub glared back even as he felt the DarkSoul within him stir at such close proximity to the one that had called it forth before. "I gave you my answer back in the Hawk tournament!"

"So you still cling to the foolish notions of 'friendship' and the paltry power it grants... Not unexpected, but regretful. Such simpering notions are forever doomed to failure!"

"I'm not like I was before!" Hub growled back, doing his best to keep his anger from overriding his sense. Taking a deep breath, he focused on the connections he'd formed, the souls he'd resonated with, and the dark urges retreated. "My friends have shown me the path of true power! My body is full of the warmth of their souls!"

Laserman. exe chuckled darkly at the proclamation. "The warmth of souls indeed... Such feeble might is no match for the power of evil! I'll teach you! CrossLaser!"

Hub jumped out of the way as the beam lanced towards where he'd been standing, the force of the blast cracking the ground even as the beam splashed outwards, almost catching Hub as he kept moving back, firing repeatedly on Laserman. exe with his MegaBuster even though the dark navi ignored the hits.

"Disruption Beam!" Laserman. exe intoned as he pointed his hand at Hub, who found himself unable to move as a bright blue laser lanced out and tore into him.

'Damnit!' Hub swore as he felt the beam disrupt his navi customizer. *'That just took out the Undershot program!'*

"Hold on, Hub!" Lan's voice called back. "Sword, sacrifice for Unison Chip! Unison Chip in, download!"

"DoubleSoul, activate!" Hub said fiercely as the familiar red form of Protoman. exe gathered around his and with the sound of a blade being drawn from its sheath, he became clad in the red armor and green-tinted shades of ProtoSoul. "Get ready, Laserman!" he continued as he leveled his sword-arm at the darkloid.

"As you wish..." Laserman. exe replied calmly as the curved protrusions on his back glowed before firing upwards. "Star Break Laser!"

The beam lanced upwards, causing something to crack ominously. Hub looked up and saw a large piece of whatever passed for the ceiling in this network falling towards him and reflexively summoned the same manner of shield that Protoman. exe sometimes used to block.

"Program Advance! LifeSword!" he yelled after the impact was over and slashed in a wide arc, clipping Laserman. exe's torso, causing the dark navi to grunt in pain.

"So... you can pierce the protection the darkness grants us now..."

"Heh..." Hub smirked. "Honestly, I wonder why it took this long..."

"The mighty Megaman brings up an interesting point the great Apollo has been wondering as well. Why did he need to use the... distasteful DarkChip before anyway?"

"Essentially, the darkloids have delved so deep into the power of darkness that they can only be harmed by two things: Those who wield the power of the dark or light and those whose souls can resist the call of the dark after being exposed to it."

"And the latter is..."

"Far easier said than done for mortals."

"DarkLaser!"

Hub jumped out of the way again, but the main intent of the attack seemed to have been the opening of a DarkHole from which a miasma poured that flowed into Laserman. exe and healed his wounds.

"Oh, no you don't!" Lan said. "BlueMoon! Giga Chip in, download!"

The shimmering blue satellite appeared overhead and took aim at Laserman. exe, who in turn charged up the protrusions on his back again.

"Star Break Laser!"

The two laser beams burst forth and clashed in midair, each one pushing against the other as they struggled for dominance.

"Lan, I don't think the chip is going to last long enough to connect!" Hub called back.

"It doesn't have to, it just needs to keep him occupied while I send something from an old friend... DoublePoint! Z-Saber! Mega Chips in, download!" (54)

Hub blinked and grinned as the enhancer and sword-type chip was sent and immediately activated the first, feeling his movement temporarily slow in exchange for extra power. He then began

charging the enhanced chip's power further with ProtoSoul's affinity for swords.

"It's useless..." Laserman. exe pointed his other hand at the nearly-motionless Hub and prepared to fire.

"Z-Saber!" Hub yelled out as he dashed forward at incredible speeds, seeming to appear right in front of the darkloid and slashed with the charged-up blade once, twice, and thrice faster than most could blink.

"D-Dr... Regal..." Laserman. exe choked out as sparks began emitting from his body where he'd been cut. "I-I'm... sorry..."

And with that, the head navi of Nebula began to slide to pieces as his data came apart, leaving the way open for Hub and Lan.

With the deletion of his navi, far out in space with no way to retrieve the data, Dr. Regal began chuckling. A dark, sinister chuckle that grew into full-blown mad laughter.

"Do you realize what you've done, young Hikari?" he asked between guffaws. "You've doomed the whole world! Only my navi had the capacity to control the alien asteroid and avert a full impact! Under my command, the survivors of humanity that I allowed would have lived in a glorious utopia of darkness, but now none of us shall live at all! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"We're not done yet!" Lan yelled back, defiantly. "We can still divert the asteroid's course and save everyone! We'll never give up hope! Right, Hub?"

"Right!"

"The mighty Apollo thinks the villainous Regal needs a thicker goatee and a reality check."

Hephaestus winced. When *Apollo* said you needed a reality check...

"Seriously," Apollo continued, gesturing towards the waiting OS program of the alien craft, "the man's navi was so steeped in evil that he wouldn't have gotten two words out before being disintegrated!"

"There it is, Lan! The control system!" Hub reported in as he spotted the giant... Well, it looked close enough to the steering wheel of an old sea vessel to be called one. Of course, there was a rather large empty and impassable hole in the cyberscape preventing him from getting there. Plus, any moment now and...

"Evil energy detected..." A giant head larger than Hub appeared and glared dispassionately down at the blue navi.

'Right on cue...' Hub thought as he prepared himself.

"What purpose do you have for coming here, evil one?" the head asked.

"Because you're headed right for our home planet!" Hub yelled back. "You'll kill billions of people!"

"Of course," the head replied. "That is my function as the Operating System of the anti-planet missile, codenamed 'Duo'. To seek out sources of evil, judge them, and finally eliminate them."

"But... kill the whole planet? That's too much! Surely there's another option!"

"The only command in memory is to judge and destroy evil. The inhabitants of your planet are sources of unspeakable levels of evil, more than I have encountered in a long time, and it is only growing. As such, judgement protocols have been activated and enough stellar mass has been gathered to administer judgement."

"That can't be right!" Lan cut in. "There's so much good down here! So many people who are innocent! They don't deserve to be destroyed!"

"Heeheehee..." a new voice cut in, one that could have been male or female. "Listen to them... Pretending to be Just... Those with evil in their hearts will say anything to forestall judgement."

"As you say, Slur," Duo. exe intoned as a navi-sized individual appeared. An androgynous figure with a human-like face, dark green bodysuit with brighter green highlights, a cropped white vertically lined top with a turtleneck over the upper portion of the torso with long flowing white sleeves, a dark green helmet with long white antenna like rabbit ears and a crimson jewel in the forehead, and a very dark superior smirk. "It is, after all, your function to gather evidence and advise on the ways of those with evil hearts."

"Indeed," the so-named Slur. exe giggled behind his/her sleeve. "Our creators made Duo able to sense the energy of evil, but without the capacity to be evil himself. A necessary flaw, but one that meant he was unable to understand those who followed the ways of evil. And so I was created to help him in this manner. To understand the ways of those who are evil and through that procure evidence of their ill spirits. In your world's terms, I suppose you could call me the prosecution... heeheehee..."

"But... what about defense?!" Hub argued back, trying to process this new development. Wasn't Duo. exe supposed to be operating alone...? "Who argues for our innocence?"

"The planet of our creators was judged before such a function could be deemed necessary," Duo. exe informed them. "Slur was the one who made the case against them."

"But of course!" Slur. exe chuckled darkly. "After all, beings who deliberately created someone like me could be nothing *but* evil!"

"But..." Hub's eyes went wide as that sunk in.

"Slur is my assigned subordinate," Duo. exe cut off the protest before it could form. "While Slur does possess the taint of evil, it has not impeded function in any way."

'Except to twist every verdict to 'guilty'!' Hub carefully didn't say. "But, don't we deserve a chance to defend ourselves at least?"

"To what end, evil ones?" Slur. exe chuckled. "So that beings of evil power as mighty as my master Duo could roam free?"

'Cache...' Lan gulped as he realized Slur. exe might be more informed than he'd thought.

"Or perhaps that the disease of darkness you call 'DarkChips' could infect even more under its siren thrall? Or maybe so those born of the darkness like that other you came with could continue to live and thrive? No, there is no defense for your planet, evil ones..."

"Damnit," Lan lost his temper, "we're *not evil* !"

"Oh, really?" Slur. exe was suddenly right in front of Hub. "Then what's this?"

Slur. exe's hand shot forth and buried itself in Hub's chest through his navi symbol. But... it didn't hurt. In fact, it felt like something was being pulled out of him and...

"AGH!" Hub yelled as an inky blackness began to seep out of his chest and crawl up Slur. exe's arm.

Okay, now it hurt... It hurt a lot.

"I believe you call this..." Slur. exe asked sinisterly as he/she began to be swiftly covered in the darkness seeping out of Hub, turning his/her green bodysuit blue and shifting the armor into something that mirrored Hub's. Even Slur. exe's face twisted into a maliciously grinning copy of Hub's own. "...a DarkSoul?"

"Can he... she... whatever... really do that?" Apollo asked curiously.

"Apparently so..." Hephaestus considered what was going on as Slur. exe used him/herself as the medium to manifest Megaman. exe's DarkSoul instead of Duo. exe basically projecting it. "At least this time... Slur doesn't normally act like that either..."

"What did you...?" Hub gasped out.

"That is part of Slur's function," Duo. exe said. "To siphon the dark power out of others and become its embodiment."

"Yes..." Slur. exe grinned with Hub's face. "And with all your power gone, you can do nothing as the great Duo passes judgement on your filthy planet!"

"No!" Hub and Lan growled together as the former stood. "We won't let you do that!"

"You have no choice!" Slur. exe laughed. "No choice but to–"

"Interesting..." Duo. exe interrupted. "It seems your power has actually increased with the loss of your darkness..."

"...what?" Slur. exe... no, Dark Megaman, started in shock.

"I wonder... Do you have the power to wipe out your own evil?"

"Just watch us! Battle routine, set!"

"Execute!"

"It's hopeless!" Dark Megaman yelled as he dashed forward, slashing with a Sword.

Hub blocked with his own and the two nearly-identical combatants jumped apart and began peppering each other with buster shots until Dark Megaman pulled out an M-Cannon.

"AreaGrab!" Hub yelled as he vanished right before the blast would impact, reappearing much closer to his opponent and slashing with his next weapon. "LifeSw–Argh!"

Hub fell back, clutching at the wound Dark Megaman's own use of the LifeSword Program Advance had left.

"Pathetic earth navi..." Dark Megaman giggled. "I have all of your abilities, enhanced by your own darkness... It's useless to resist!" his arm formed into a SuperVulcan, prompting Hub to dodge the rapid-fire blasts. "Give in and be judged!"

"Like heck!" Hub retorted as the next set of chip data was sent. "BlueMoon!"

The pale blue digital satellite formed and fired its beam, engulfing Dark Megaman where he stood, eliciting a cry of pain.

"You..." Dark Megaman growled out as he stood and formed a darkly pulsing cannon that he pointed at Hub. "You filthy evil little... Die where you stand! Alone before your final judgement!"

"No!" Hub yelled back as he dodged the blast, bracing himself against the shockwave as it impacted behind him. "I won't lose here! And I'm never alone! I have Lan with me, and the spirits of my friends fight with me! All of them heroes!"

Hub began charging up his buster as the avatar of his crimson rival Protoman. exe appeared next to him and readied his blade.

"Program Advance! Double Hero!"

Dark Megaman roared in pain as the blasts and slashes tore through him, but refused to fall. In fact, he rushed forward, his fist enlarging and becoming yellow as he slammed it into Hub's face, sending him careening back across the asteroid's cyberscape.

"It's all over for you and your filthy evil planet!" Dark Megaman yelled as he turned invisible and began shooting wildly in Hub's direction. "Your judgement is inescapable at this point! Accept it and perish!"

"Never!" Hub retorted as he too turned invisible and tracked where his evil twin was shooting from as he prepared the next chip Lan had sent. "I choose to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow! GunDelSol EX! TAIYOOOOH!"

The light burned away Dark Megaman's invisibility, and after a few moments more his damaged form followed. Out of the spread of sunlight, a dark shadowy mass shot back into Hub like it had been on the other end of a rubber band stretched far too tight.

"Guh..." Hub grunted as his DarkSoul returned and concentrated, forcing the dark mass of emotions and desires back down within himself.

"So... you managed to defeat your own evil power..." the voice of Duo. exe reminded Hub and Lan of the situation. "A fine battle, and Slur's first loss. However... I can sense that you have only managed to suppress the evil within, not destroy it..."

"What are you...?" Hub hated the sinking feeling he was getting.

"Your evil will return one day," Duo. exe continued. "It seems you are in fact not strong enough to defeat evil. Judgement will be administered and your planet's evil destroyed. Point of no return approaching..."

"Of course I can't destroy it!" Hub retorted, Duo. exe's inflexible views setting his temper off. "It's part of me! The capacity to do evil is a part of every human and navi on the planet! But so is the capacity for good! We all struggle to decide how we'll act every day! Will we give of ourselves to help others, or hurt them to help ourselves? Suppressing our darkness to act on the light is how we fight evil! Each and every day of our lives! Some of us might fall along the way, but for the most part we defeat our evil when it wakes!"

"My mission is to destroy evil. That it will mean your race's extinction is a regrettable, but necessary cost."

"WE WON'T LET YOU!"

"You who possess evil within," Duo. exe intoned as his floating head rose up high above the platform. "You have threatened the Operating System of the anti-planet missile. My program is clear on what must be done. You will be destroyed and judgement carried out."

Duo. exe's head let out an alien-sounding bellow as a powerful force began to gather.

"System defenses online! Battle Body!" a massive torso appeared under Duo. exe's head, gleaming white with a large blue stripe leading to an open vent... or an energy weapon, and extending down past where the edge of the cyberscape allowed Hub to see. "Right Arm!" a massive arm with a spiked shoulder with an even more massive fist appeared. "Left Arm!" an equally massive arm and fist, but with a giant red crystal in the shoulder instead of spikes, appeared. "Duo battle mode activate!" a pair of large vertical horn-like antenna sprouted from Duo. exe's head.

"Lan, get ready!"

"I must destroy all evil!" Duo. exe declared as mines and missiles began launching from his torso vent in Hub's general direction.

"Yow!" Hub yelped as he did his best to dodge the digital munitions.

"I'm sending BattleChips!"

"Hurry!" Hub implored as the torso vent began to glow an ominous red.

"Unison chip and BattleChips in, download!"

"Duo Cannon: Fire!"

"ProtoSoul!" Hub yelled as with the sound of a drawn blade he was clad in the red armor of Protoman. exe just in time to use the shield ability to defend against the massive laser that Duo. exe shot at him, only for the laser to tear right through the defense as if it didn't exist and blast him backwards.

"Gah!" Hub grunted as he rolled out of the energy beam's path and got to his feet. "AreaGrab! LifeSword!"

Dashing forward fast enough that he vanished from sight as the laser beam dies down, he reappeared right in front of the opening and slashed the interior with all his might. He was rewarded with some sparks of protest from the opening, but little evidence of damage, right before he was forced to retreat as Duo. exe moved and swung a giant fist at his position in a massive hook, followed by a second from his other arm that Hub barely dodged as well.

"Here it comes, Hub! Z-Saber!"

Hub grinned and began charging up the blade for use before dashing forward, only to have the slashes clang off of Duo. exe's thick armor as he shifted his torso vent out of the way due to winding up for a punch.

"JusticeOne!" the fist nearly caught Hub with a direct hit as he retreated, breaking a crater in the cyberscape and flinging the smaller combatant back from the impact's shockwave.

"Okay, new tactic!" Lan called as he sent new chip data over, including a new unison chip.

"GutsSoul!" Hub cried out as the cyberscape shook from his transformation into the yellow armored form even as Duo reared back both fists this time.

"Fall into defeat!" Duo. exe declared, only for Hub to turn invisible. However, instead of staring in confusion, he began punching the

cyberscape rapidly and randomly in the hopes of getting a lucky shot in.

"DoublePoint! SuperVulcan!" Hub yelled as super-enhanced bullets began rapidly pelting the interior of Duo. exe's torso vent.

"GRAAHH!" Duo. exe yelled, his face twisting in pain and rage even as it seemed to turn red and grow to immense proportions in Hub's view.

BOOM!

The red energy wave that possessed the appearance of Duo. exe's face slammed into the ground and blew Hub back once more, dispelling his invisibility and his GutsSoul form as he crashed along the ground.

"Nnngg..." Hub moaned, barely registering Lan's frantic calls for him to get out of the way as more missiles and mines shot at him from Duo. exe. It was hard to hear Lan over the sinister pulsing of the DarkChip in his systems, calling out to be used against this powerful foe. With effort, he rolled out of the way of Duo. exe's assault and ignored the DarkChip. He'd used it once, and as far as he was concerned that was once too many.

"Even now, your evil tries to awaken," Duo paused in his assault to pontificate his absolutism. "As it will continue to do so forever."

"Yeah..." Hub grunted back as he forced himself to stand, "and I'll keep telling it to shove off every time it tries. If it awakens a hundred times, I'll force it back down a hundred times..."

"...Very well. Show me," Duo. exe insisted before renewing his assault.

"RollSoul!" Hub was engulfed in a warm healing light and his armor shifted to the pink of Roll. exe as he ignored the DarkChip in favor of the data Lan sent instead. "HiCannon!"

"Keep it up, Hub! I've got a plan, but I need to assemble the right chips first!"

"Roger that, Lan!" Hub declared as he fired two more HiCannons. One destroyed a missile and the other pinged off of Duo. exe's armor

It went like that for half a minute. Duo. exe fired his weaponry and swung his fists as Hub dodged his best and returned fire with the BattleChips Lan sent, the power of RollSoul restoring his health with every shot, successful or not. Until the power ran out and he reverted to normal.

"Got it!" Lan yelled in triumph right as the light of Hub's reversion faded. "Now we just need to wait for him to fire that laser again!"

"You mean like *right now* ?" Hub worried as he spotted the red glow building up in the torso vent.

"Ack! BattleChips in!" Lan frantically sent the chip data and Hub felt the Program Advance form none too soon.

"Program Advance!" he yelled as a single giant mirror popped out of the ground in front of him and angled itself straight for the building energy of Duo. exe's torso vent. "PileDriver!"

"Duo Cannon: Fire!"

The intense beam of digital sunlight lanced forth down Duo. exe's torso vent even as Duo. exe tried to fire it, the beams of energy meeting inside the opening and exploding spectacularly.

"Graaah!" Duo. exe yelled as a chain reaction was set off even as Hub dropped to his knees from the effort of the battle. First Duo. exe's right arm was severed from the massive armored torso, then the left arm, and finally the armored torso itself exploded, leaving the unadorned head of Duo. exe floating in the cyberspace as before, looking confused. "How? None have ever beaten my battle form before... However, you are too late. The point of no return for this

craft is fast approaching. Once it has been passed, the natural gravity well of your planet will take hold and not even I will be able to change course soon enough to spare your race."

"I refuse to believe there is no hope!" Hub yelled back. "No matter what it takes, no matter what it costs me, I will save everyone!"

"..." Duo. exe seemed to consider Hub for a long moment. "If I have learned anything of the nature of evil from Slur, it is that evil is selfish. Those are not the selfish words of an evil heart. Very well, I will permit you to attempt to change this craft's course."

A glowing platform appeared beneath Duo. exe's floating head.

"You have less than one hour by the way your race measures time to succeed."

Hub stepped forward, looking at the massive steering wheel that represented the navigation controls. Schooling his features, he grabbed one of the prongs and shoved with all his might.

It felt like he was an ant trying to move a mountain.

"Push! PUUUSSHH!"

"You sound like a birthing coach..."

"...Please don't tell Artemis, but the virile Apollo has attended many of those sessions with his mortal lovers... It might cause the manly Apollo's sister to see him as being less manly..."

"I really don't think her opinion of you can actually *get* any lower..."

'Move, damn you!' Hub cursed internally as he shoved the cyber steering wheel with all his might. It remained right where it was.

"It may intrigue you to know," the head of Duo. exe intoned as Hub continued his struggle, "that Slur has put together several tests to determine if a race will choose evil or good. The most decisive of these is the knowledge of their impending doom. Knowing that judgement is coming, the majority of beings descend into evil acts in their final moments."

"Of course!" Hub and Lan yelled together.

"They're afraid of dying! They want to live! Everyone wants to live!"

"You don't give them another option! Given an option, most people will choose a better path!"

"You say that if they knew of a way to avert doom that was Just, most would choose it? Over one that is evil?"

"Yes!"

"Interesting," Duo. exe said. "Let us test this with those who know you."

Many places across the world, before a very select group of people, devices sprang to life with a mysterious and identical broadcast.

"A great secret has been kept from you, people of earth. The secret of your impending demise. For a giant asteroid is on a direct collision course with your planet. One large enough that, upon impact, will wipe out over eighty percent of all life. At the heart of this asteroid, guiding its path is the anti-planet missile developed by an alien race called the Star Marshals. Within this craft's systems is a single Earth navi by the name of Megaman."

An image appeared of the small blue navi struggling fruitlessly with a steering wheel many times his size.

"You have been judged, people of Earth. The sentence is extinction. However, due to this navi's actions a stay of execution may be granted and judgement deferred for several centuries. You must choose. Either offer nothing and pray that this earth navi may, by some miracle, change the path of the asteroid with his paltry strength or..."

The broadcasting voice paused for an eternal ominous moment as the giant face of the speaker filled the visual.

"...offer him as sacrifice to I, Duo the arbiter, so that he may pay for your collective sins with his own life. If this is done, I will change the asteroid's course."

"W-what...?" Mayl gasped as she heard the proclamation from her computer.

"Th-that's... you..." Dex twitched in confusion as he looked rapidly between the scene on his monitor and the other room where his little brother Chisao was playing. "I..."

Chaud glared at the monitor. This life of one navi versus the life of everyone on the planet...

"Ohmygod..." Mary breathed rapidly.

"Calm, Mary," Ring. exe tried to keep her NetOp from hyperventilating. "Deep, regular breaths."

"Master Lan and Megaman will definitely succeed!" Kai grinned, but the smile looked a bit shaky. "...Right?"

Mamoru simply stared at the television with an unreadable expression while his aunt swore and picked the shards of glass that

used to be the glass she'd been holding when the broadcast came through out of her palm.

Yai stared at her monitor.

"Miss Yai?"

She stared some more.

"Miss Yai?"

Was it just her or was the room spinning a whole lot all of a sudden?

Thump (55)

"Miss Yai!"

Raika stood at attention in the Sharo Space center and watched the broadcast that had the Red Sun champion gripping the console so hard his knuckles were white. As a soldier, he knew that sacrifices for the sake of the mission were necessary, but still...

Mr. Famous and his apprentices all stared slack-jawed at the scene on the Netfrican village's public television.

'So this is what the tournament was all about... I knew something was up, but I never suspected they were recruiting for a mission to try and stop an alien craft from destroying the planet...'

A bar filled with net criminals; former, current, and 'former'; stared at the television that had, up until a few moments ago been showing a special on the highlights of the Blue Moon and Red Sun tournaments.

"Is... is that navi who I think it is?"

"It is clear what must be done," Raoul's tribal elder stated as he watched the broadcast next to the man.

Raoul turned to look at the older man who had attempted to curse Thunderman. exe's semifinal opponent, only to be thwarted when both navi and operator steadfastly refused to rise to his bait. He had a sinking feeling about this.

"For the good of the world, the navi must die."

"Yes! Kill him! Kill him for what he did to me! KILL THEM ALL FOR SHUNNING MY GENIUS!"

"I need some help here!" a guard yelled as he struggled with the crazed man.

"DO YOU NOT KNOW WHO I AM?! I AM THE CINEMA SENSATION VIDDY NARCY! I WILL SEE MYSELF AVvveeeennnggggggggg..."

whump

"Geez, what the hell happened?" the guy who'd hit the crazed man with a sedative asked.

"Dunno, he was hogging the television like normal when he suddenly went completely nuts."

"Hehe..." Terry Jomon chuckled hysterically to himself. "What do I care if some no-name navi dies? What do I care if anyone dies? My life is over anyway..."

"Hmph... Let navi die..." Chillski grumbled to himself. "What do I care? Is too hot to care..."

"It is!" a dark-skinned red-haired girl grinned widely as she shot to her feet in the bar and pointed dramatically at the television. "It's him! The navi who stopped Lord Wily from saving the planet! How fitting that he should die for it now!"

"Indeed..." a man at the same table in a red hoodie and a cap with a navi symbol containing a boomerang on it atop his head chuckled. "What is one life compared to the whole world?"

"Sal?" Woodman. exe asked in confusion as he watched his NetOp begin to shed tears.

"W-what is one life c-c-compared to the w-whole world?"

Mr. Match glared at the screen with all the fiery rage in his heart.

"Th-that's him, isn't it?" his date for the evening, the woman from the hot dog stand outside DenDome, asked. "The navi that beat you when you were...?"

"Yes..." Mr. Match growled out, boiling mad.

"Then... then I suppose–" she was interrupted by Mr. Match slamming his hands down on the table with all his might.

"You think I'll agree to sacrifice Megaman to you, you pompous alien good for nothing?!" he yelled at the restaurant's television. "You think I'd admit for a single second that he isn't strong enough?! He took out the WWW! Three times! He took out Gospel! And everything both of them threw his way! Until the day I can beat him, I'll never admit he can lose to anything! If you expect me to sit here and wait quietly for the end to come, you've got another thing coming! My soul is

aflame and I'll ignite the heavens themselves with the fire in my voice!"

Mr. Match took a deep breath and yelled up at the endless sky above with all his might. He missed the look of surprised pride that his date gave him as he did.

"DO YOU HEAR ME?! DON'T YOU DARE FAIL! I KNOW YOU CAN DO THIS! **MEGAMAAAANN!** "

The 'former' net criminals known as Anetta and Speedy Dave groaned from the floor of the bar as the rest of the patrons stared at the young boy standing over them.

"My name is Sean Obihiro," the boy announced with a glare that could freeze lightning in its tracks, "the former head of Gospel, and I will have my navi Freezeman put the next person who calls for Megaman's death *on ice* . He *will* save this world, and everyone in it, whether they deserve saving or not."

"Sal... isn't that the kind of attitude the bad people have?"

"Y-yes..." Sal sniffed.

"Didn't you tell me that our purpose was to protect nature for everyone, by protecting both nature *and* everyone?"

"I... I did, didn't I? Thanks Woodman. Nothing good comes from despair. We mustn't give up hope while Megaman still fights. There... there must be something we can do..."

"Like you have told me before, we can have faith."

"Yes... Indeed we can."

Raoul rubbed his fist as he stood over the downed, injured, and confused elder of his tribe.

"I will thank you not to disgrace our people further with your cowardly actions. I have seen the strength of Lan and Megaman before. It will be sufficient. This I believe."

"Any more of you punks want a piece of this?!" Tetsu growled out as he held his bloodied fist up threateningly, the unconscious forms of several others strewn around him. "That up there is a *man* ! And none should force a man to back down from his chosen path once he's set himself upon it! Fight on! MEGAMAN!"

"That's... an ambitious recipe, Flave..."

"Yes it is, Orr."

"It, um... takes a few hours to prepare and all..."

"I just guess I'll have to have faith that the world will still be here long enough to finish, right?"

"R-right!"

"He will save everyone! He has to!" Paulie yelled out, startling the adults. "He saved us after all! He even saved me!"

"Right..." Mr. Famous grinned as the other villagers began to come around. "It would be ungrateful to just give him up after all that, wouldn't it? Megaman won't let us down!"

"Damn straight!" Bullet yelled.

"Let's hear it for Megaman!" Takeshi agreed, taking a deep breath along with Charlie and Kalinka.

"ME-GA-MAN! ME-GA-MAN! ME-GA-MAN!"

"MASTER MEGAMAN!"

"I'm... I'm sorry," Mary apologized. "I can't cheer that loud..."

"Don't worry," Tamako grinned. "I'll cheer loud enough for us both! MEGAMAN!"

"Hey, me too!" Ring. exe cut in. "I'll cheer for you too Mary! MEGAMAN!"

"I have faith in you," Mamoru smiled.

"But..." Nanako looked worried. "The odds..."

"Megman's strength defies all odds," Numberman. exe tsked. "He will succeed in even the most improbable of circumstances.

"That's right, huh! If it weren't for him, I'd have never started this chip shop! MEGAMAN!"

"YAAAAHH! MEGA*hic*MANSH!"

"I'm all for cheering for him too, Lilly," Windman. exe sweatdropped, "but did you have to mix up your water and sake to do it?"

"*Whoosh* MEGAMAN! Like that, Shuko?"

"Yeah, just like that! He's Mayl's friend after all, which means he's gotta be a good gu–oop!"

Wham!

"Shuko! Are you okay *whoosh*?"

"Ow... I'm fine Aquaman... GO MEGAMAN!"

"DAMNIT, MEGAMAN!" Dex yelled loud enough to shake the house. "PUT YOUR BACK INTO IT! I'LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU IF YOU GIVE UP NOW!"

"YEAH!" Gutsman. exe added. "WHO'D BE OUR RIVAL THEN?! MEGAMAN! MEGAMAN!"

"MEGAMAN!" Chisao joined in. "DON'T YOU DARE LET BIG BRUDDA DOWN!"

"You show that alien what-for you whippersnapper!"

"LAN! MEGAMAN! I can never repay you for rescuing my son, but please! Save us all one more time!

Slur. exe limped back up the connection from the Earth device. It had been a close call, but shedding the Earth-navi's DarkSoul had been all that was needed to escape deletion, if not injury. Escape and move to sever the connection so the filthy evil-hearted humans would have no hope...

It wasn't even going to take that much. The pitiful device was practically on the breaking point already. All it needed was a little time-delayed push...

"I'm right here for you Hub!" Lan yelled into his PET. "Don't give up!"

Zhzhzhhhzh...

"Hub?" Lan trailed off as his PET showed nothing but static on the connection. "Hub! Come in Hub! Answer me!"

Dr. Regal listened to all of this as he walked over to examine the sparking noise and saw one of the power cables had snapped.

"How unfortunate..." he mused. "Without a sufficient supply of power, there is no way to maintain the connection, much less operate him."

"Serenade?"

"Do not worry Yamatoman. Have faith. All will be well in the end."

"Baryl, sir?" Colonel. exe asked. "There seems to be some trouble with the transmission array at NAXA."

"Keep sending the data..." Baryl ordered through grit teeth. "They're doing everything they can on their end, so we do the same here. Keep the connection going at all costs! After that... It's all up to the Hikari boy and his navi..."

"Affirmative."

"They will succeed," Protoman. exe observed calmly as he and his NetOp rode towards NAXA.

"Of course they will," Chaud snorted. "That's what they do."

"There is but one way to restore the connection," Dr. Regal steeled himself calmly. "We must bypass the snapped cable to restore power. LIKE SO!"

Dr. Regal reached forward and grabbed the sparking ends of the severed cable and bridged the gap with his own body. He heard his body scream distantly as enormous voltage passed through him, but his thoughts were clear.

'Make no mistake, Hikari, I don't do this for you! I do this because the world's fate is mine to decide! Its evil destiny mine to write! When you succeed today, it shall pave the way for the ultimate future of evil!'

"Well?" Duo. exe asked the nearly immobile navi as he struggled with the navigation wheel.

"I'll never give up!" Hub growled out as he continued to fruitlessly try and move the behemoth device.

"And neither will I!" Lan's voice returned after it had been suddenly cut off. "We do this together! Full Synchro!"

Hub felt the connection flare and the steering wheel moved just a bit.

"Hmm?" Duo. exe looked surprised.

"No good, Lan... It's not enough..."

"Nnnggh...! You're right... I... I'm reactivating chng. bat... You ready?"

"Yeah... STYLE CHANGE! HUB STYLE!"

Hub's form was enveloped in coding rings and began to glow with the power of Hub Style as they subsided. The steering wheel began to turn. Slowly.

Too slowly.

"We can't give up! Everyone is counting on us!"

"Lan..." Mayl offered a silent prayer.

"Megaman..." Roll. exe did the same.

"Their souls have power," Miyu declared. "As do the souls of all they've touched."

"I know... I... I can feel their faith in me..." Hub grunted out. Unseen to him, a translucent floating pinkish form appeared behind him. The phantom of Roll. exe moved as if she were helping Hub push the wheel. A moment later and a phantom Gutsman. exe joined her. Then a phantom Protoman. exe, and Fireman. exe, Numberman. exe, Thunderman. exe, Woodman. exe, Iceman. exe, Freezeman. exe, Topman. exe, Skullman. exe, Ring. exe, Metalman. exe, Turboman. exe, Gateman. exe, Kendoman. exe, Enker. exe, Quint. exe, Punk. exe, Ballade. exe, even Jammer, Orr, and Bo, and on and on.

"RRAAAHHHH!" Hub gave one last heave and sent the giant steering wheel spinning wildly. "We... did it..." he gasped out before collapsing.

"I see..." Duo. exe observed the unconscious navi. "I understand now... It is not that you merely have the strength to fight the evil within yourself, but that you inspire that strength in others. It is a mighty power to have. Judgement has been deferred. One day, I shall return to judge humanity again, to see if the strength you have displayed remains with them. Until then, I leave you this parting gift... Now, begone little warrior."

With those words, the unconscious Hub was surrounded by a bright glow before he was forcibly jacked out.

Lan, unconscious from the stress backlash from Full Synchro, did not notice the symbol that glowed on his right hand. A symbol of a diamond surrounded by lines that formed an angular geometric shape not unlike Duo. exe's head in battle mode.

"Lan... Lan!" voices yelled at him.

"Hmm?" he jerked into consciousness. "Did we do it?"

"Yes," one of the scientists declared with relief. "It's headed away from our planet, thanks to you and Megaman."

"That's good to hear," the groggy voice of Hub agreed from Lan's PET. "But it's not over, there's still–"

"Dr. Regal, wait!" the voice of Lan's father echoed from the upper platform even as the sound of a helicopter approached.

"Lan!" the familiar voice of Chaud called from the aircraft as a rope ladder fell down almost on top of Lan. "Grab on!"

Lan didn't waste any time grabbing on and letting himself be lifted to the upper platform as Chaud climbed down to join him. Together, they rushed to the ledge Dr. Regal was perched upon.

"Okay, so... the villainous Dr. Regal helped save the world? Just because he objected to how it would be destroyed?"

"Pretty much. All without reforming one iota."

"The confused Apollo needs to lie down now... Before the pigs start their stunt flying act..."

Dr. Regal gazed out at the endless horizon as he waited for his adversaries to close in.

"What will you do, Dr. Regal?" Dr. Hikari asked.

"Do?" Dr. Regal replied with total calm and confidence. "I shall vanish of course. I will not permit myself to be arrested."

"Wait! It's not too late to start over!" the Hikari boy yelled. "You risked your life to save the planet! I'm sure that counts for something! Chaud's here, he'll back me up!"

"He'd still have to pay for his crimes," the young official noted and was about to continue when Dr. Regal could no longer contain his chuckling.

"I do not believe any of you understand the situation," he laughed lowly. "I have no intention of paying for any 'crimes'. After all, I feel no guilt over the supposed 'wrongs' I am accused of. You are the ones who should feel guilty for what you've done. Thinking you are in the right when all you cause is harm. Never seeing that your 'good' is in fact the true evil."

"..."

"Lan, didn't you destroy my syndicate navi? One who had no idea what was truly going on? How about you, Chaud? How many navis have you and Protoman deleted as officials? How many might have been innocent of their accused crimes? And Dr. Hikari... Heh... If you hadn't pursued your NetNavi project in the first place, netcrime would be impossible at the level it currently exists. And those scientists who built this thriving net society exiled a brilliant roboticist who could have changed the future in ways none of you could ever comprehend, forcing him to fall into so-called 'evil' ways. I once knew him... as my father."

"Then, you're...?!" Dr. Hikari's surprise was palpable and so very sweet.

"Yes," Dr. Regal finally turned to face his adversaries and look them in the eyes. "I am the son of Dr. Wily. But let us stick to the matter at hand. Humans commit crimes all the time without realizing it, and then presume to condemn others for their crimes. In short, you are all criminals... You and the entire filthy human race... Doesn't it sound just ridiculous? Criminals judging criminals? That is why I'm resisting arrest," Dr. Regal spread his arms widely and grinned at the three, thinking back on the revelation he'd been given while acting as a living conduit to the immense power of the transmitter. Two words making one concept that now defined him more than ever. "I am the world's destined Regal King and I won't be judged by anyone. I shall

stick to my beliefs until the bitter end! For evil shall always remain as humanity's true nature! Farewell!"

And with that, he let himself fall backwards into the open air, knowing that when his adversaries ran to look for him, they would find no sign at all.

"Why... did you let that wretched Earth navi go...?" Slur. exe grunted out as he/she continued healing his/her wounds. What really made Slur. exe angry... was that Duo. exe hadn't just turned right around and made good on the rightful judgement.

"Because he showed me something that I believe has been lacking from my databanks," Duo. exe replied calmly. "That even if a race has the inborn potential for evil, that does not mean they are beyond hope."

"Of course it does!" Slur. exe yelled out vehemently. "All who bear the taint are beyond hope! It is in their natnnnngghh!"

"Control yourself, Slur," Duo. exe commanded as a powerful glow in his eyes faded back to normal, Slur. exe's pain retreating as they dimmed. "I do not fault you for your beliefs, for you were designed to see the worst in others and use their evil against them, but I expect you to convey those beliefs professionally."

"Of... of course... My apologies, arbiter Duo."

"As you said, you are the prosecution in the duty of judgement, but that leaves our circle incomplete. As the little warrior showed me, a judgement as final as that which we bring deserves a defender. One to speak for the accused and provide evidence that they are either not as evil as it may seem, or that they can combat their innate evil as the little warrior did. Justly and fairly. Without sabotage."

Slur. exe winced involuntarily.

"Yes, Slur, I know what you tried to do. It mattered not though, for I was prepared to change course and spare the people of Earth for choosing the right path. That my personal intervention was unnecessary was... quite surprising."

"I suppose that is why you marked him and the human..."

"Yes... So that should we meet again I will know that they have gained my favor and approval. Even if I do not remember giving it. Though I may not believe it even then."

"I... do not understand..."

"It matters not. The anomaly I speak of lies outside our duties." (56)

Lan smiled and waved as he was handed the Blue Moon trophy in a special delayed ceremony at the Netopian Coloseum before he went home.

"Is all this really necessary?" he whispered to the head of NAXA that was presenting the trophy.

"Be glad I talked them out of naming you the 'World NetBattle Goodwill Ambassador'," the woman whispered back.

Lan just barely managed not to roll his eyes as he continued to smile and wave. Baryl had categorically refused an exhibition NetBattle between the Red Sun and Blue Moon winners, citing the need to return to his duties, but he'd probably be asked to perform some sort of exhibition for the gathered crowd anyway.

He just hoped he could get it done with fast. On top of a bunch of homework Hub was probably going to make him do on the flight back to catch up after falling behind while he saved the world, Lan really wanted to get back to practicing that 'subspace pocket' thing Django had showed them. It was the most awesome thing he'd ever encountered!

'Although... I can't help but feel I'm forgetting something...'

Deep in the undernet, there was a bubbling pit of shadows that was rumored to lead to a place known only as Black Earth. It was called such because those who had seen the pit figured that only a land as pitch black as the shadows the pit oozed forth could produce them.

In reality, none had ever entered. At least none who had returned to tell the tale.

Had any done so, they would tell of an eerily empty landscape in the furthest depths of which dwelled a giant floating mirror. A mirror which those hypothetical explorers might have whispered could save your soul from the foulest corruption. Or perhaps they would have whispered that it could damn it beyond all hope forever.

"I am the Mirror of Truth."

"The hell is this?"

"I reveal the truth hidden within. Before me, lies and deceit are meaningless."

"You're the great power I sensed? What a gyp... what is...?"

"Bass...? I'm sorry... my..."

"The hell are you doing?! Who is that?!"

"I can see the truth within your soul. All must be exposed."

"Like hell! I'll shatter you into a million pieces!"

Perhaps by some fortune, or perhaps misfortune, a traveler might have seen the legendary lone warrior try to smash that mirror to pieces with his bare hand, only to have it caught by an identical hand as it emerged from the mirror.

"Let us see..."

"What the f...?! Who are...?"

"Let us see the truth within your soul."

"Isn't it obvious? I'm the real you."

Maybe such a traveler would have been able to explain how that legendary lone warrior came to be rendered as a statue that the navis of Nebula would later discover just beside that pit of oozing shadows before taking him back to the depths of their territory.

A statue that remained there still, an unknown struggle going on behind his eyes.

"Unless you have a sweet dreamscape viewer!"

"Quiet, I need to calibrate this properly..."

Bass. exe allowed his opponents shots to splash off his aura as he fired both of his busters wildly right back, the shots splashing uselessly off of the identical aura his opponent sported.

"Is this *seriously* the best you can do?" Bass. exe's cloaked opponent taunted as Bass sent a bug-lighted beast claw flying at the pretender. "I mean, we've been going at this for, what? Hours? Days? Weeks? Months? And you haven't been able to so much as scratch me! I'm almost ashamed to be you!"

"Shut up already!" Bass. exe roared as he formed the Gospel-head cannon and fired a gout of elemental power from it. Right before it hit, his opponent vanished in a blur of movement. A swipe of something from behind him dispelled his aura and Bass. exe whirled around, bringing an even larger Gospel-head cannon to bear. "Vanish into the void! VANISHING WORLD!"

The explosion of power nearly threw Bass. exe himself back as his target was hit point-blank, but he was prevented by a strong grip that pulled him forward as something was shoved through his torso right through his old scar.

"Wha...?" Bass. exe grunted in pained confusion as he looked to see the blade-like spike of dark energy emitting from his opponent's hand and piercing his body.

"Oh, I could have done that anytime. I'd just hoped you weren't so pathetic..." his opponent withdrew the blade and touched the fingers of his hand to his forehead as he gazed disdainfully down at Bass. exe. Using a face and body identical to Bass. exe's own. "Is this really what I've been reduced to? Having to crawl around the dregs of the net pretending I don't remember anything in order to justify my desire for combat? Pretending that I never had anyone who cared so I don't have to justify being on my own?"

"I didn't have anyone, you faker..." Bass. exe growled out as he secretly gathered power beneath his own cloak. "I've always been this way... On my own..."

"Liar," his copy grinned smugly. "Dr. Cossack created you to help humanity. Loved you like a son with all his heart. Put himself on the line to make sure you'd survive when old Alpha went nuts. Gave everything for you and all he asked was that you come home... And what did I do in response? I told the old man to fuck off of course! Because now I'm exactly what I always wanted to be! Powerful! Strong! Able to kill anything and anyone that dares keep me from what I want! I don't need your pitiful little sob story to justify my way of living! For I have the power of Darkness within me!"

"HUB STYLE!" Bass. exe lunged for his opponent, shimmering with the data power of the style change he'd recently discovered (or rediscovered perhaps?) and leading with the glowing power in his formerly hidden palm. "EARTHBREAKER!"

"DARKNESS OVERLOAD!"

...only for his reflection to bring his own hidden hand out glowing with dark power and slam it into Bass. exe's own. The explosion of force as the stronger attack overpowered his own tore into Bass. exe's body, but he forced himself through the shockwave to grab his double's neck.

"The power of Darkness, eh?" Bass. exe chuckled, ignoring the pain that action wrought as he tightened his grip. "I like it... I think I'll take it... GetAbility! D...?"

Bass. exe trailed off in confusion as his oldest power failed him for the first time in his life.

"Bwahahahahahaha!" his double laughed hysterically, uncaring of the hand gripping his neck. "Oh, that's just too funny! GetAbility! On yourself! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"What...?" Bass. exe tried to get his focus back, only to be cut off by a punch to the abdomen that forced him to his knees.

"Don't you get it yet?" his double grinned sadistically as he raised both arms and slowly gathered orbs of dark power in them. "I'm Bass. I'm *you* . The power I have? It's already there. It was *always* there. You're just the version who's too weak to claim it. Always wanting to blame it on 'Daddy Cossack' or clinging to an oversized puppy to save you from yourself. Trying to excuse your dark existence by pretending it was forced on you. Me? I'm the Bass who freely admits that I *like* living in the Darkness. The one who's strong enough to take what I want, including control of my life from a mewling weakling."

"OVER MY DEAD BODY!" Bass. exe yelled, charging up his buster cannons and aiming them straight for his double. "CROSS BURST!"

"No..." Bass. exe grinned right back as he took the impact, ignoring the damage as the orbs of darkness solidified in his hands, "my *living* body!" He thrust his arms forward and the orbs became a

series of dark rings that converged on his opponent. "Hell's Rolling!" (57)

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1) Apollo's mind possibly spends more time in the gutter than out of it really.

2) I will give you exactly one clue (aside from story context) until the big reveal: It's not an OC.

3) The whole supposed NetBattle ban was something I never quite got in BN 4. I mean, was Lan breaking the law in the first three games with all those optional fights or what?

4) wildrook: Within five seconds, too.

5) Elan, the Order's bard for those of you who don't know.

6) Tetsu's navi's name is now Bo until such a time, if any, that official media says otherwise. Why? The word 'tetsubo' in japanese means 'iron bar' or 'crowbar' so I thought it would be a nifty naming scheme.

7) His mind kindly blocked out the possibility that they might get married at some point. After all, that was a bit much to take in on top of everything else.

8) Thanks to Leonite, OathToOblivion, and masterofgames who offered input on what scenarios Lan should go through in each of the tournaments.

9) When Subplots Collide.

10) FaceNavis are what I've taken to calling the generic navi sprites that have human-like faces in the game. They come in male and female varieties, as well as different colors like NormalNavis. The orange and grey generic navis that are most often used by people in positions of authority in the games I've taken to calling OfficialNavis.

11) Er... what?

12) Good lord that's a long string of possessives.

13) Wow. I had to watch no less than five separate Let's Plays to get all of those. Did I miss any of the questions? If so, please let me know any others the game might ask in this scenario!

a) Footsteps.

b) Iceberg.

c) Pearl.

d) Cards.

e) The Sun.

f) My Son.

g) Sand.

h) Umbrella.

i) Wheel.

j) Sponge.

14) So, basically, his usual expression.

15) ***"You."***

16) This is not the Gutsman. exe that's basically a joke for a competent player. This is the Gutsman. exe that one-shotted three undernet ranked navis. At the same time.

17) Why, yes, I do own a copy of the MST3K movie.

18) Hands up: How many of you despise me for doing that?

19) Yeah, I took the fact that Haruka (Lan's mom) says she'll whack any more intruders with her frying pan in the game (so Lan will stop worrying over her and go out with Mayl) and ran with it.

20) You know, I tried to pick one, but I just couldn't. There's just too many awesome ones (though I think 'Watch Me Shine' by Joanna Pacitti is rather appropriate in this scenario). Insert your favorite.

21) Hephaestus pretty much whacked him upside the head.

22) The one where Megaman. exe and Shademan. exe appear in Boktai has no real explanation (to my knowledge) of how they got there. And the scenario in BN6 was cut from non-japanese releases.

23) Anyone else remember that job in BN3 where you have to pretend to be a female navi's boyfriend?

24) Lan did a fair bit of gloating over winning the bet.

25) Oh, hey, I gave a provisional name to Flave's navi too.

26) A good chunk of the aftermath of Mary's heart attack as well as Lan and Hub's entire fight with Viddy Narcy and Videoman. exe was written by the amazing Leonite.

27) Lest anyone forget, Mamoru is the undernet's administrator. He's a good kid, but he's hardly unfamiliar with the concept of retribution. And this is more justified than most.

28) The kind you wear. He has one for Django too.

29) This line thanks to burningclaw2.

30) Ring. exe herself had a crush on Protoman. exe, but she really didn't deny it.

31) Yes, Admins can use subconscious messages to give mortals a bad case of foot-in-mouth syndrome. It works best with those who have a habit of speaking before they think.

32) Let's face it. There's a significant difference between doing something amazing on accident and doing it on purpose.

33) I love Mythbusters.

34) I find this explanation a bit more logical than Atsuki spontaneously combusting.

35) Gorou Misaki and Prismman. exe are from the anime in case anyone was wondering.

36) He's a loser. He's such a loser in fact that he doesn't even merit any emphatics denoting his loser status.

37) While one of the mettaurs lamented the loss of its pickaxe, it really didn't want to put any effort into retrieving it.

38) Yeah, this set-up was begging for bodily harm against the tournament officials. Pity the poor guy who tried this against Mr. Famous. Also, it means Jack Bomber basically bypassed the whole preliminary. I don't really like him, or the way he belittles everything and everyone that's not part of his esoteric fandom, so I'm implying that he's not necessarily as skilled as the other contestants.

39) The whole thing with the third tournament in BN4 really broke suspension of disbelief in a lot of places. Sure, I can buy that Lan's travel expenses would be covered by the tournament since he was invited, but what seems to be free travel to multiple countries (which isn't even getting into the travel times and the fact that the whole tournament supposedly takes place in a day) is stretching it at best. So the Blue Moon tournament is thus taking place over a much longer time period, with plenty of time to hype everything, possibly show exhibition matches from those who didn't qualify, and basically turn the whole thing into a big deal and the sponsors are covering any additional expenses for competitors if they're allowed to interview and film them for the TV spots.

40) If you recognize the name Takeshi and how it relates to the Battle Network series, then congrats!

41) Personally, I'm imagining these two newscasters as human counterparts of Ripot and Plum from the classic series, but you're free to think of them however you wish.

42) For those who didn't recognize the name earlier, 'Soul Battler Takeshi' is a real life person who does, or at least used to do, Battle Network tournaments. Since everyone who does those essentially uses Megaman. exe, I naturally considered that a good enough excuse to make a Quint. exe for his BN persona.

43) Loop joke. I know I shouldn't explain, but Setsuna, aka Sailor Pluto from the Sailor Moon series, is often depicted in fanfiction as being a hardass for preserving the timeline. Such behavior by her variant incarnations gave rise to the term 'Setsuna Syndrome' to describe the view that only a singular progression of events can be tolerated in the Loops no matter how many times it must be done (and sometimes that such a progression will 'fix' the Loops). Otenko's got a relatively minor case of it.

44) One Piece!

45) His last boss was Cache in case you were wondering.

46) I am not outright stating that Lan lost FolderBack, heck I'm not saying he ever *got* FolderBack, but the joke of implying it was too good to pass up.

47) The names of the NetOps for the NetNavi Killers/Elite Four:

Kalinka is, of course, based on classic series' Kalinka Cossack.

Takeshi's last name is from a man who did some voice work for the Megaman games. Among other roles, he was the voice of classic series Dr. Wily. He died in 2012 and will be missed.

Bullet is based on a character who was supposed to appear in the cancelled Mega Man Legends 3. His last name is based on the alternative translation (Barrett).

Charlie Nash is loosely based on the Street Fighter character of the same name.

48) Lit. Saint Dark from what I understand.

49) Think Bodyguard PA, but with bombs. And randomly targeted like Meteor.

50) Note that, as Valkyries, Brynhildr, Eir, and Herfjötur are not prone to using hyperbole or idleness when making threats.

51) Because Dex would think 'panel cracking element' wasn't badass enough.

52) Russian for 'OH MY GOD!' At least according to Google Translate.

53) Yai's smart enough to know you really can't have too many backup options when it comes to planes. I'm assuming those in ground control are of a similar opinion.

54) Zero. exe gave Lan and Hub a gift way back in the Transmission adaptation before they parted ways.

55) She fainted.

56) *cough*LoopAware*cough*

57) Oh hell…

Mega Loops 16

Mega Loops 16

16.1

"Now," Professor Lupin asked with a smile, "normally I'd ask for a volunteer, but we have some interesting students in this class."

The professor looked straight at Rock and Roll.

"To be completely honest, I wonder if a boggart's powers would even work on either of you."

"I'd kind of like to know myself," Rock admitted first as he stepped forward, wand at the ready.

"Very good. And you know the incantation, correct?"

"Riddikulus."

"Very good! Now..." the professor grasped the door of the cabinet, "begin!"

The door opened and out from the cabinet strode a man that the purebloods of the crowd didn't recognize. He looked like some elderly muggle with a bald spot and graying hair that stuck out wildly from the sides of his head and a thick mustache. He wore blue pants, brown shoes, a collared shirt, a red tie, and an open white coat. He also sported a very wide and very sinister grin.

Those students who were familiar with events in the muggle world gasped in fear and took a step back, to the confusion of those students who weren't.

"Hello Mega Man," the man greeted with a sickeningly confident tone. "Come to die, have you?"

"Riddikulus!"

The spell struck the man, but seemed to have no effect. All it seemed to have done was give him what looked like a red gem in the center of his forehead and long triangular purple markings over his eyes that held the appearance of scars. And then he started changing even more.

His right eye gained a monocle-like device over it which possessed a triangular extension even as the shadows on his face darkened until the one over his other eye had combined with the monocle to produce the illusion that he was wearing shades while his grin grew even wider. Impossibly so. His gray hair shifted in hue to be more blue, except when the light hit it just so and it seemed more reddish. The clothes beneath his coat became finer in appearance and design, almost Victorian, and he produced a skull-topped cane that was clearly for show.

"I see you remember," the new version of the man was now making even those who didn't know him nervous. "I have returned to claim my rightful place at last! The world, the universe, and all of creation shall bow before me! Creator of the Master System! Model W! Leader of Dark Sigma! Destined Regal King! Dr. ALBERT! WEIL! **WILY!** *"*

"Riddikulus!"

The spell came from a wide-eyed Roll and suddenly the man's head popped off and began bouncing back and forth on a giant spring emerging from his neck.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" The man laughed even as his head bounced around wildly on the end of the spring. "You're too late again! The real me is already making good my plans to–"

Rock shot up in his rest capsule, eyes wide. It took him several minutes to remind himself it had just been a dream before he believed it.

"Rock?" Roll asked hesitantly, the alarm his sudden unscheduled awakening triggered having woken her up too.

"My boy, are you alright?" Dr. Light worried as he charged in, also having been awoken.

"Fine, dad, sis," Rock responded. "Just the boggart nightmare again."

Roll stiffened for a moment before nodding in sympathy. She remembered that incident in Harry's universe. It had been... very disturbing. And that was just for those present who had no clue what it meant.

"It'll be fine, my boy," Dr. Light reassured. He'd have done the same even if not Awake, just after asking questions about what the heck a boggart was and why his children would have nightmares about one. "Whatever happens, I know you will be equal to the challenge."

"Thanks..."

16.2

Blues considered the city he found himself in this Loop. Foreboding architecture, gothic, dirty, wretched, and a dark undercurrent that resonated with something in him he generally preferred not to think about.

He was a police detective again, homicide division, and a former military man even. Human rather than a robot, though it seemed that his father was still Dr. Light, and had still made Rock and Roll. Just... in another city. Heck, he'd Awoken engaged, which was a first, and

figured he'd give that the best possible shot he could. Assuming things didn't go south. And considering the city he'd become a part of, things could very definitely go south.

The police department was thick with corruption and the city was even worse. Even his new partner was caught up in it, though Blues suspected the man went along under silent protest. Which would make it one of the few things he was silent about.

Blues tightened the scarf around his neck and recentered his shades as he approached the alleyway. It was a double homicide in the city's theatre district. Middle of the night. Victims were an adult male and female, one witness left alive. Blues looked over at the witness, sitting huddled under a police blanket on the wrought iron steps at the bottom of some fire escape, looking frightened, alone, in shock, and utterly and completely lost. The victims' son.

Fighting down a dark impulse to leave the kid to his misery, Blue walked over to talk to him.

"Hello. My name is Blues Light," he spoke to the boy. "I'm a detective. What's your name?"

The boy made a sound that could have been a shiver or a sniffle, but said nothing.

"It's fine," Blues told the boy. "You don't have to say anything."

As the boy shook some more from either cold or grief, Blues looked around to see his partner talking to a uniformed officer. He heard some talk that sounded like his partner was trying to beg off the case and not having any luck.

"Bruce..." the young voice spoke up, refocusing Blues's attention back on the boy. "My name is Bruce Wayne..."

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16. Splat

Zero blinked as he came to consciousness. That had been a rough last Loop. He and X had managed to erase the Maverick Virus by essentially taking the virus's essence in its entirety into themselves (a trick that only worked due to the virus's nature that Loop). Unfortunately... their success had come at a cataclysmic price. Reploids aside from the two of them were all but extinct and humanity wasn't that much better off. Then there was the fact that the anti-virus they'd cobbled together to purge the Maverick Virus once contained wasn't going to work fast enough to ensure they didn't lose focus in a bad moment and let the virus gain so much as an instant of control. So they'd voluntarily put themselves in stasis chambers to sleep away the long time the anti-virus would need and hopefully reawaken when the world had been put back together.

...Come to think of it, the stasis chamber he had Awoken in looked a lot like the one he'd ended the last Loop in.

"See gramps?" a female voice was heard. One all too familiar to Zero even with the muffling of the stasis chamber between him and the source. "What'd I tell ya? A real find, right?"

"Hmph..." an older male voice snorted. "I don't trust it... It doesn't seem fresh to me..."

"Oh quit your whining gramps!" the female shot back. "I have a good feeling about these things. Why, I bet they've got something amazing inside that'll help me out there!"

The old man grumbled something about a trick.

"You and your conspiracy theories gramps. They're never coming back. Now let me see... How do these things op–"

The voice was interrupted as the pod Zero was in gave a loud hiss. Zero blinked at the light hitting his optics and then again as they cleared. The girl staring at him in awe *looked* like Ciel. That is, if Ciel possessed long pink squid tentacles instead of hair.

"Whoa..." the squid-Ciel gaped as Zero stepped out and looked around in confusion. Next to his pod was the one X had been sealed in. And that was the only familiar thing anywhere.

"I knew it!" an old man... with a spikey beard that looked made of some rubbery substance, much like the squid-Ciel's 'hair'... dressed in the tattered remains of a military uniform declared. "They're some of DJ Weil's OctoMavericks! Sent to destroy us all!"

"DJ *who* ?" Zero blinked some more. After all, he could *not* have heard that right...

The squid-Ciel ignored the old man's ranting as she looked Zero up and down, a wide grin splitting her face. "We are going to *dominate* the turf wars!"

16.A

The Avengers were enjoying the slightly inebriated attempts of each other to try and lift Thor's hammer when the sound of metallic footsteps interrupted them.

'Ah, no,' Steve Rogers thought as he tensed up. *'Tony, you didn't...'*

"Hello," a flat voice, and one much less mechanical than Steve had been expecting, greeted the Avengers as they looked up. The figure was red and grey, with a surprisingly human-like face. At least what could be seen of it beneath the helmet and the shades that went with it. Oh, and it was holding Loki's scepter. "Which of you are Tony Stark and Bruce Banner?"

"Uh... that'd be me and him," Tony answered after blinking in astonishment and pointed to Bruce who was raising his hand awkwardly. "Now... who are you and how did you get in here?"

"I'm Project Blues according to your files, and I think the both of you are idiots. Do either of you have any idea what you were messing with?" he asked, raising the scepter pointedly.

Steve blinked. *'Okay, this is different...'*

"The potential for an artificial intelligence to defend mankind greater than we'd ever get a chance to study again?" Tony replied in that cocky way of his, while thinking to himself: *'Also, I was curious what would happen if I named the project something other than Ultron. Though now I wonder if that was the Loop messing with me...'*

"I'll take that as a 'no'," the self-identified Project Blues snorted as he raised the scepter and then smashed the glowing orb on a convenient hard surface. A yellow glow replaced the blue one as what Steve knew to be the Mind Infinity Gem was released.

"The Mind Infinity Gem," Thor identified tensely.

"AKA, about the absolute *dumbest* thing to be playing around with when designing an artificial intelligence," Project Blues glared at Tony and Bruce. "You two *idiots* could have created a doomsday intelligence without even knowing it!"

Those Avengers who were Awake rather deliberately did not reveal that was what normally happened while the angry android pushed the Infinity Gem away from him harshly.

"If any of you value this planet or anything on it," he spoke with disdain, and a wince that all but Steve missed, "then you'll keep that damn thing far away from me."

"Wait, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take a walk."

"What about defending humanity?"

Blues turned and gave them all a gaze hidden by his shades, though the disdain was still palpable. "Humanity can learn to defend itself for a change."

'You know,' Steve pondered as the robot turned and walked out of the room, *'considering who that otherwise would have been, that went rather well.'*

"'Humanity can learn to defend itself for a change'," the voice interrupted Blues as he left the building. "Did you really mean that?"

"What's it to you?" Blues snapped and looked up. Sticking to the wall was a man in full-body red and blue spandex with the red having a web-pattern design and a spider emblem in the center of the chest.

"Nothing much," the man pushed off the wall in an acrobatic flip to land beside Blues. "Honestly, Tony and Bruce can be too smart for their own good at times, so it's always fun to see them eat crow. Especially when it doesn't involve people running, screaming, or potentially losing their lives."

Blues snorted, but said nothing as he continued walking.

"You still haven't answered my question though," the man kept pace easily. "When the apocalypse comes calling, and believe you me it really likes to keep in touch some Loops, are you really just going to stand by and let it?"

Blues stopped and sighed long and hard before he answered. "No. No I won't. It's just..."

"The Infinity Gems," the Spider-Man finished. "That's what they're called. They're ridiculously powerful artifacts designed to basically rewrite the specific universe they're from when gathered in one place, and each one by itself is nothing to take lightly either. Trust me, I've done the dance with those things more times than I care to count by now and I never hold onto them longer than it takes to undo

whatever they were used for. Because the longer you're near them..."

"The more tempting they get," Blues nodded.

"Yeah," the Spider-Man agreed as the two walked in silence for several minutes. "So, anyway, I was originally going to see if I could mess with the Avengers a bit until they either asked me to join or succeeded in kicking me out, but now I think I want to start a rival team and maybe save the world better than they can. Fix all their usual mistakes and whatnot. It'd certainly drive Tony up the wall if we pulled it off. Whaddya say? Wanna join?"

Blues pondered that for a minute. "Why not?"

Set 16, Loop 5 by Gamerex27

Dramatis Personae:

ROCK: An android defender of mankind.

ROLL: His sister.

BLUES: Their astray brother.

RUSH: ROCK's robotic hound.

TANGO: A robotic cat that lounges around the lab. Likes ROLL.

DR. LIGHT: Their creator and father, a genius inventor.

AUTO: An earlier model of robot created by DR. LIGHT.

DR. WILY: The former comrade of DR. LIGHT, now a madman.

THE THEATER MASTERS: DR. WILY's creations, designed to help him seize dominion over all the world.

HEPHAESTUS: Their Admin in charge of repairing and safeguarding their universe.

ACT 1, SCENE 1:

Inside DR. LIGHT's laboratory:

-Enter on ROCK and ROLL doing house chores. Both of them Awaken, and stare at one another.

ROLL: Hey, does something about this Loop seem...off?

ROCK: Now that I think of it...yeah. But I can't really tell what.

-Enter AUTO stage left, carrying parts for a new ROBOT MASTER-

ROCK: So, it's around the time where Dr. Wily hacks into the TV and says that he stole Dad's newest Robot Masters to take over the world, right?

ROLL: Yep. Three, two...

-Enter DR. WILY, on the nearby television set, cackling madly.

ROLL: One. Huh, still haven't gotten the timing down yet.

DR. WILY: Good afternoon! I'm here to make a special announcement! Tonight, the Wily Theater company will be staging a performance all over the city! The play's title: "Dr. Wily Takes Over The World!"

ROCK: -Aside- How original.

ROLL: Wait, who are you talking to?

ROCK: Hephaestus...I think.

-Stagehands wheel HEPHAESTUS'S IN LOOP AVATAR across the stage on his mobile office, as he bangs his head on his desk, from Stage Left to Stage Right-

HEPHAESTUS: This is the *weirdest glitch yet.* Sorry, I can't fix it until after this Loop is over. Just be glad it's not a musical! -Exit Stage Right-

ROLL: O...kay, then.

ROCK: Yeah, we already dealt with the Music Masters a few Loops ago.

DR. WILY: Tickets to this event are free and unlimited, since my Theater Masters will be conquering the entire city! Remember to respect the actors! Do not talk or call for help during the play! Turn off your cell phones during and after the play!

-Enter DR. LIGHT, Awake-

DR. LIGHT: Hasn't he done this one before?

ROCK: No, that was the Music Masters. Hey, Dad, does something seem off about this Loop?

DR. LIGHT: Now that you mention it...something about this does seem *strange* . I'll have to run some tests to see if this Loop's laws of physics are different. While I'm doing that, would you two mind upgrading yourselves and stopping Dr. Wily?

-AUTO trips on a piece for the new Robot Master, sending it sprawling across the ground to DR. LIGHT-

DR. LIGHT: Ah, wait. Before you go, take this.

-DR. LIGHT gives ROCK the weapon. ROCK integrates it into his arm.

ROCK: What is it?

DR. LIGHT: My Unawake self managed to salvage parts from one of Dr. Wily's Robot Masters before he had time to recover and rebuild him. One of the Music Masters, now that I think about it. Odd: he rarely re-uses Robot Masters he takes from elsewhere while he's Dreaming.

ROLL: Wait...I think I see where you're going.

DR. LIGHT: Yes! Musicals and plays have a lot in common, after all! If you use the Music Masters weapons against the Theater Masters, it may give you an advantage!

ROCK: Great. Thanks!

-ROCK and ROLL exit stage left. Machinery sounds as they rebuild themselves-

DR. LIGHT: -aside- I didn't want to worry them, but it may be more than just *physics* that is broken here. I just hope that it won't be too destabilizing. I have experiments to run, and I can't do that if this Loop crashes and I go to Eiken!

HEPHAESTUS: -offstage- Are you talking to yourself, or to me? I honestly can't tell.

---

16. Bar (Evilhumour and myself)

Mega Man walked into the bar with his sister and father, all still in shock and horror.

"Two words my friends." The heroic looper offered. "Doctor Billy."

There were winces all around, particularly from a young girl with what had previously been an angry bored expression and what appeared to be a skeleton in a hooded black robe. Complete with stereotypical scythe.

"On the plus side, his robots took themselves out without us having to do a thing."

"On the minus side, they each took out large portions of city infrastructure in the process. Not all from the same city."

16.6 ⅓ (Zerorock41)

Zero lay on the ground of the falling Ragnarok, arms removed and the rest of his body in critical condition. He had no idea how it happened. It shouldn't be possible...

Standing above his broken body, Weil cackled madly while Omega smirked monstrously. Weil spoke, "How does it feel Zero? To know that now I'm a part of these Infinite Loops? And that it was all your fault!"

The Awake Weil continued cackling as the Ragnarok burned around him.

Zero tried to stand, "No! You shouldn't be here! It's not possible! No! No!"

" ***NO!*** " screamed Zero.

"Dude calm down!" A worried Axl sat at Zero's bedside, shaking him.

Zero panted as he calmed his electronic heart. Axl asked, "You up now?"

"Actually feeling a bit Loopy."

Axl's face contorted in mild confusion, "Yeah. I know. The Loop hasn't ended yet."

Zero felt a great weight come off his chest.

16.7

"We cannot allow this to happen!" Dr. Light exclaimed dramatically. "We must step forth to put a stop to Dr. Wily's mad ambitions!"

Rock and his sister exchanged glances as their father used the line he'd chosen to show he was Awake instead of the usual cue for them to volunteer for conversion into fighting robots. Their dad was *such* a ham lately. But it gave them an idea for how to have fun with this Loop.

They'd just gotten back from a fused Loop in Naruto's universe, one where they were the human children of Dr. Light and a Hyuga woman, and they needed a break from all the seriousness and pessimism that Madara infused into everything he touched. As luck would have it, Naruto's Loop provided the perfect attitude to emulate.

"YOSH!" the blue-armored robot yelled as he smashed through the wall into Dr. Wily's inner chamber, followed by a yellow-armored female model and... was that Dr. Light wearing a military bodysuit under his labcoat? With a bowl cut?

'I know *I didn't mix any medications today!'* Dr. Wily thought in confusion in his Wily Machine MK I. *'Heck, I stopped taking them altogether!'*

"Surrender Dr. Wily, or face the power of YOUTH!" all three cried at once.

16.8 (Scorntex)

Roll and Dr. Light stood their ground, the former wielding her broom, glowering at Dr. Wily, as the man sighed as if he were the one being inconvenienced. This, after he had lied about reforming, and tricked

Rock into fighting more of his Robot Masters, and was now intent on taking Gamma, again.

Behind Wily, Doc Robot looked at the flames it had created to block the doorway, the reason Roll was holding back from knocking its head off in the first place. That, and the confined spaces of the lab,

Dr. Light just kept his gaze on Wily. "I am not giving you access to Gamma." He stated, trying to keep his hands at his side. It was hard. Not least because his Loop memories told him Blues wasn't Awake this time, and still every bit Albert's weapon of revenge.

"Rock will be back any minute." Roll said, brandishing her broom at the mad doctor, keeping him from coming any closer. Wily just sneered.

"Ah, yes. Your precious *second* son, who barely survived fighting eight of my glorious robot masters." Doc Robot just chuckled, which was all the more unnerving when it was with all eight of Wily's original Robot Masters' voices at once.

"Let him come! We're *all* dying for a rematch!"

And then Roll chortled. Dr. Wily just looked quizzically at her. Doc Robot, on account of his design not giving him any kind of facial expression, just tilted his head.

"What gives?" Heat Man asked.

"You? Rematch against the robot who already beat you?" Roll asked, in-between laughing. There was a growl from Air Man, Crash Man and Quick Man.

"HE DIDN'T BEAT ME!" All three yelled at once. "Nobody beats me!" Said Air Man alone.

"All evidence to the contrary." Roll snapped. Doc raised its arm at her, but then Wily intervened.

"It doesn't matter now. Mega Man has already met with *my* Break Man," He broke out a smug smile at that, at the thought of Rock having to fight his own brother, "Leaving us free to talk. Provided my Diverse Operations Circuits Robot here doesn't do something we might *all* regret."

"Yeah, right." Roll said. "Like Bubble Man could threaten anyone."

There was a sad noise from said Robot Master, followed by a snicker from Quick Man. "Hey, she's right. You are kinda useless. How quick did Mega Man take you down again, Bubble Boy?"

"It's Bubble Man!"

"Whatever."

"Now, now," Wood Man cut in, "Let's all calm down in here."

"Easy for you to say!" Flash Man cut in, "You weren't stabbed in the back by this weasel."

"Oh, get over that already." Quick Man sighed. "It's not like it was permanent or anything."

"People." Metal Man spoke up, "Can we please focus?"

"Shut up!" Quick and Flash Man yelled.

"Alright," Flash Man spoke up, "You and me, we're solving this thing, right here and now!"

"... How, exactly?" Heat Man asked. Doc Robot looked about the room, awkwardly.

"Alright," Quick Man declared, "We'll go rebuild our original bodies, and then we'll sort this whole thing out!"

There was a moment of utter silence, the only sound being the noise of the computers, and Rock fighting outside.

"Alright, fine." Metal Man eventually said. And with that, Doc Robot turned around, put out the flames blocking the lab doors, and walked out, the Robot Masters muttering to themselves as they went.

Roll and Dr. Light looked at Dr. Wily, who just looked utterly baffled. Then he realised where he was, and that both Roll and Dr. Light were unbelievably angry with him.

"Ah." He finally managed to get out. "I surrender?"

16.0

"Hello Zero..." the seemingly immortal madman grinned, his battered and weathered flesh having been flayed to reveal the ridiculous amount of cybernetics prolonging his life, particularly the thick technological sphere making up his left eye. An eye that glowed with power along with madness. "How appropriate that it should come to this in the end... That it should remain just myself against the very embodiment of all that I have struggled with for countless ages..."

"Look," Zero sighed, having heard far too many versions of Weil's insane speeches over the Loops and very much not in the mood for another, "I don't really care what your problem with me is, but I have a sworn duty to protect everyone from people like you an–"

"And I have a destiny to protect them from dangerous machines like you!" Weil spat so venomously that Zero, veteran of countless fights against madmen and zealots, actually took a step back. "Hehehe... It's clear you know I'm right, 'son of Wily'... The last apocalyptic creation of the most dangerous man ever to live...!"

"Wha...?" Zero blinked several times as he tried to process that. Weil tended to idolize Wily... Sometimes even thought he was Wily's reincarnation... He'd never *hated* the man...

"I've argued against the dangers of machines for longer than you've been active... I've tried everything to show people how you *robots* ," Weil spat the word like it was the most vile of curses, "would be their undoing. I've argued the case reasonably, I've threatened people to do away with such uncontrollable technology, I've sabotaged everything from production plants to inventors, I've destroyed, I've killed, I've even encouraged the problem so that people will finally see what a danger you artificial mockeries are! And then I finally realized that if I was ever to save the world from itself, I'd have to conquer it! Every last man, woman, and child under my rule so I could save them from their own reliance on artificiality! You have never known me as anything other than Weil, the name the ignorant masses gave when they exiled me into the wastes, knowing I would one day return, but I have had others over the ages, all dedicated to the sole purpose of wiping you machines out!"

"Who...?"

"I am the chosen messiah of humanity! The shining emerald spear upon which the race of machines shall finally perish! I am Xander Payne and today I destroy, now and forever, the age of advanced robotics!"

16.9 (me and TheZMage)

"Welcome to the Reploid Research Lavatory!" Berkana greeted the visiting leader of the Maverick Hunters.

"..." X looked around the room without comment for several seconds. "This is a repurposed public restroom..."

"There were some budget issues..." Berkana sighed forlornly.

"One side!" A voice behind them yelled, and X was knocked aside as Overdrive Ostrich ran past him into one of the stalls. "Important research!"

16... (Hubris Plus)

Roll crept through the remains of the castle. Rock wasn't Awake this Loop and had opted to remain a lab assistant while she went out to fight, so she was on her own in Wily's ruined fortress. It wasn't that novel of a sight, except that this one had been ruined long before she'd gotten there. Before his latest bid for world domination, even. The explosion registering on satellite monitors had been the first sign that he was up to anything, and she'd been sent to see what she could determine from the blast site.

So far all she'd found were twisted support structures and broken robots. Careful examination had shown that a good chunk of them had been destroyed *before* the explosion. The blast made it hard to determine specifics, but it was painting a picture she didn't like.

"Approaching the command center," she informed the lab over her radio.

"Be careful, Roll," Dr Light answered.

"Yeah," Rock chimed in. "The world needs Mega Woman now more than ever!"

"Don't worry, whatever Wily's planning, I've-" She froze on the threshold, staring at the tableaux before her. "I... I don't think this is a trick."

The room was paradoxically the best protected and in even worse shape than the others. The walls still stood, but were cratered with dozens of scorched impacts. Glass from the huge wall monitors littered the floor while the monitors themselves burned fitfully, belching smoke. The console lights were dead, some of them melted, and the panels below had been blown outward. Broken robots were heaped at the door. The worst though, was Dr Wily.

His body was slumped against the console, and she had no doubt it was genuine. Wily-Bots were convincing, but the disguise only ever went skin deep. The damage went significantly deeper. She looked away from the grisly sight, deciding to skip the gory details.

She was startled out of her stupor by a soft scrape behind her, and whirled to face the entrance. There, in the doorway, was a girl with her face.

"Waltz," Roll snarled. "I should have known." Her Mega Buster deployed and charged, power rising quickly to maximum capacity as she leveled it at her counterpart.

But she didn't fire. Something wasn't right. Waltz wasn't even looking at her, instead staring, wide eyed, past her. At Wily's corpse. Her hands were curled over her mouth and trembling.

"No... Nonono," her doppelganger murmured before falling to her knees.

Still wary, Roll stalked closer, buster pointed directly at Waltz's head. "Explain," she instructed.

Waltzed recoiled and stared up at her as though she hadn't been aware of the other robot. "It... It wasn't supposed to be like this," she stammered. "Quint... Oh Tesla, Quint's gone insane. Why would he..."

"Start making sense," Roll growled.

"Roll! The poor girl is in shock!" Dr Light scolded her.

"She's... one of Wily's," she answered lamely. Now wasn't the time to drop the entire Looper business on him. She lowered her Buster anyway. Waltz would pull tricks, but she also despised showing any kind of weakness. She also wouldn't turn down an opportunity to shoot someone in the back.

"Quint, he... Did something to the others. They just stopped, and then... And then they started *destroying* each other, and the base, and coming here and... And... Oh Tesla, they were all *screaming* ," she whimpered, arms wrapping around herself.

"So why did he leave you alone?"

"I... I don't know." She scrunched up further. "I almost wish he hadn't."

Roll sighed and reformed her hand. Waltz might be lying, they might have to fight, but she just didn't have it in her to point a weapon at someone so obviously falling apart.

"There were tire tracks outside," she said. "I thought they were Wily making his escape, but... Was it Quint?"

"I... Probably. I don't think there was anyone else to make a getaway."

"Then I'll stop him. And then I'll be back for you." Roll turned and stalked out the door.

"Wait!" Waltz cried out and staggered to her feet. "Let me come with you!"

"Why?"

"This... This is everyone I've ever known. And now they're gone and... I don't want to be alone. Not here. Not now. Maybe not ever."

"Roll," Light said gently. "If she's immune to whatever effect this is, she may be vital to defeating this Quint."

Roll glowered for a moment before waving for her counterpart to follow. "Fine, you can come. But try anything and I'll take you apart."

"Don't worry," Waltz clenched a fist as she started walking. "I just want this to end."

Roll shoved the remains of a Joe unit out of its seat in the Dozer. The ground behind them was littered with broken Mets, the little 'bots crushed between the ground and their helmets even though the hardhats hadn't gotten a scratch. The driver had sheared it's head off against a low ceiling before coasting to a halt.

Waltz clambered up after her, Roll pointedly refusing to lend a hand up, and clung to the side by a seam in the chassis. She rocked on her perch but held firm as they set off.

With no transponder to trace they'd have to follow the tire tracks Quint had left to find him.

Roll watched as her counterpart turned to watch the Joe as they rolled away, noting the tense set of her shoulders. As they wound their way down the hill the other robot would shift to stare at the fallen castle, and continued long after the forest had obscured it.

"Why do you care?" Roll suddenly snapped. This was *Waltz* . She didn't mourn, didn't introspect, didn't have anything in her but rage and madness.

"He made me," Waltz answered quietly. "He made all of us, and he gave us all a purpose. We were going to save everyone."

"Save them?" Roll blinked in surprise. This hadn't been a mirror variant, Wily was just as crazy as ever. Well, he HAD been, she corrected.

"All the robots. We were going to throw down the humans and *free* everyone. We were going to be heroes." She looked down. "That'll never happen now."

"...Humans aren't so bad, you know," Roll said after a moment.

"Not really," Waltz admitted. "The Doctor was the only one we ever met."

Roll hummed. That put things into a certain perspective.

"Why do you work for them if they aren't forcing you, then?" There was a little of Waltz's familiar mocking tone there, but it was mostly strained bravado.

"They're so soft and squishy," Roll answered. "You just kinda feel BAD watching them do a robot's work. It's like seeing a Met carrying an I-Beam when Guts Man's right *there* ."

"I resemble that remark..." Dr Light muttered over the com.

"Maybe if you stuck to that jogging regimen I put you on..." Rock scolded.

"I guess I can see that," Waltz chuckled, a small smile forming. "I can't count how many times I had to make the Doctor go to bed when he wanted to pull an all nighter. He tried to do everything himself, but Quint ended up having to..." She trailed off, face falling as her mind caught up with her mouth.

Neither of them felt much like talking after that.

Roll pulled the dozer to a halt as they left the woods, stopping next to a car with a bubble dome over the driver's seat and a cartoonish skull mounted on the hood.

"Wilymobile?" Roll asked.

"How'd you know?" Waltz returned without any trace of irony.

"Just, you know, the..." Roll waved at the enormous purple fins sprouting off the back. "Everything."

"...I'm just gonna come right out and say I've never seen any other car."

"That..." Roll shook her head before she hopped to the ground. "Once we're done here, we're gonna watch some Fast and- Wait, no, Blues Brothers. Definitely Blues Brothers."

"There's a movie about Break Man?"

"Best. Movie night. Ever," Roll grinned. Not to mention the Loop they'd talked him into spending in a suit and tie. He already wore sunglasses at night.

The good mood faded as they crested a hill. Spread out below was an installation surrounded by a high chain link fence. It was in better shape than Wily's lair, but not by much. Military vehicles were overturned and smoking in the yards, walls were cratered or toppled over, and smoke drifted up from several points. In the center, a massive radio tower jabbed into the heavens, seemingly untouched by the chaos around it.

"Dr Light, I think we've found Quint. What am I looking at?"

"A military broadcast center," he answered without pause. "One of several designed to bypass satellites and overpower jamming in the event of electronic warfare."

"That was fast," Rock commented.

"I helped design them," their creator admitted, melancholy. "After Ra-Moon, such centers seemed necessary."

"Dr Light?" Rock asked carefully.

"I had thought that a communications hub couldn't be used for evil, but if Quint is there... Roll. Be careful."

"Don't worry. We're putting a stop to this. Whatever it is.."

They reached the fence and Roll jumped on. She was preparing to haul herself up and over when the familiar sound of Waltz's fingers guns deploying came from behind her. Deploying her own Buster,

she spun, one hand holding her to the fence while the other prepared to cut into her opponent.

Waltz ignored her, all ten fingers splayed wide and glowing before discharging into the fence a few feet over. A few more salvos and a smoking section toppled inward, cut clean through by plasma fire. She stalked through, determination written across her face.

Roll stared after her for a moment before dropping down and following. It was getting harder and harder to associate this girl with the maniac she was used to dealing with. The usual Waltz wouldn't have bothered to aim. Wouldn't have cared about Wily or the other robots. Wouldn't have been able to hold such a solemn expression for so long in the face of destruction she would have loved to cackle over. Wouldn't have joked with her or kept quiet for so long.

She was still waiting for the other shoe to drop but, as she caught up, she was no longer sure it would be Waltz's.

They hadn't gotten far before a jeep hurtled around one of the buildings. One Joe was driving while another clung desperately to the hood, its legs already torn off by contact with the ground. Swerving wildly, the vehicle smashed into the bunker to their left. The Joe on the hood was crushed between the structure and the engine block, his eye going dark. The other was rattled as the car crumpled, airbag shredding under the robot's weight.

After a few seconds it lifted its head and bashed out the door before climbing out. Its shield had been discarded at some point and its blaster arm was warped and blackened. One foot dragged on the ground, metal dented around the knee.

"This unit must be destroyed," it informed them in the typical electronic monotone. Its good arm raised and reached out towards them.

"Stay back," Roll warned it, raising her Buster at it. This only seemed to encourage it as it hobbled faster. She'd weathered few Loops in

the Protomen variant that Blues hated, and this was giving her flashbacks to that demented Joe unit that haunted the streets there.

"This unit must be destroyed," it stated again. "Sixty seconds remain."

"Until what?" Roll asked, backing up. It managed to move quicker, approaching until her barrel was within inches of its chest. And then... Stopped.

"This unit must be destroyed," it reiterated. "Forty five seconds remain."

"N-no," she stammered as she realized what it was asking.

"This unit must be destroyed," it gripped her Buster and lifted it to eye level before resting its helmet against the glowing barrel with a metallic *tink* . "Thirty seconds remain."

"What's going to happen?! Why do you have to be destroyed? Please, just tell us what's going on!" Roll pleaded.

"Please," it mimicked, seeming to pick up on the word. "This unit must be destroyed. Please. Please. Please." Its eye glowed slightly brighter. "Ten seconds remain. Please."

"We can fix you! Whatever's wrong, we can fix you! Shut down, go to standby, *something* !"

Its eye went dark and Roll almost slumped in relief before it returned as a single crimson pinprick.

"Update in progress. Installing patch 1.4.D.13." Its head twitched to the side. "Update compLEtE." It slapped Roll's buster away and darted in close, good hand curling around her throat with a grip strong enough to crumple tank barrels. "ThIS uNIt MuSt bE deSTRoyEd. MUSt Be DesTROYed. DEStroY. DeSTrOy. DestROY."

Its monotone was polluted by static, pitch rising and falling wildly as it squeezed.

"Roll!" The rogue machine's head was shredded by a hail of gunfire an instant before Roll could raise her own still charged Buster. She staggered back as the machine released her and toppled over.

Waltz stood there, one hand outstretched while the other curled in front of her mouth. Roll half expected her first kill to set her off, to hear a mad giggle moments before those guns found new targets.

But she just stood there, wide eyed. After a moment she brought the outstretched arm in and stared at her palm.

"I... I've never..."

"It doesn't get easier," Roll told her gently. "But you learn to cope."

"I..." Waltz shook her head and clenched her fist. "Let's put a stop to this. End him, before he can do any more."

Roll nodded and the pair forged on ahead.

They arrived at the base of the tower without further incident. Every other robot they'd come across had either been gunned down by its companions or found some way to self-terminate.

Looking up, Roll caught sight of someone climbing amongst the tower's girders. "Quint?"

"Yes." Waltz set her jaw and seized one of the supports, hauling herself up.

As they rose, Roll noted Quint's appearance. He was different this Loop. No armor, for one, just a green t-shirt and shorts in imitation of Rock's civilian mode. He was also taller, proportioned more like an

adult. He'd broken open a control panel about halfway up and was operating on its innards.

"Why isn't he geared for battle?" Roll asked.

"He only has a civilian mode," Waltz answered. "Doctor Wily thought that having a lab assistant was giving Light an edge, so he built his own. Smarter, more capable, more mature... More ambitious, too, I guess."

He noticed them when they were two stories below his position and waved down cheerfully. His other hand continued working a screwdriver in the panel.

"Waltz, and the infamous Mega Woman! I was wondering if either of you would get here in time, and here you are! Right on cue and working together! Well done, defying your programming like that."

"What's going on, Quint?!" Waltz called up. "Why did you kill the Doctor? Why are you doing... *this* ?!"

"Oh, it's quite simple, really. Well, conceptually. Practically speaking, it was fiendishly complex and considered by many to be impossible. But, you know," he tapped a finger to his temple. "Genius."

"Stop congratulating yourself and explain what you're up to!" Roll snapped.

"What, reveal my plan? Tell you in excruciating detail what I've done and where it's going? Distract myself with inane banter when I'm moments away from my ultimate victory? Why that sounds..." He tossed the screwdriver over his shoulder and plopped down on the girder. "Absolutely delightful! Where should I begin?"

Roll and Waltz exchanged glances but didn't slow their ascent. "What did you do to those robots?"

"Ah, my D.13 protocol. Very proud of that." He waved a directional transmitter in their general direction. "See, it's actually *two* data packets. The first one is just a read me file. Tells the robot *exactly* what the second will do."

"Which is..?" Roll prompted.

"Destroys their ability to determine what is and isn't human. Once they can't tell friend from foe the three laws take over and try to prioritize what to save from who. Insects, skin bacteria, twinkies... They might *all* be human as far as they can tell, and most all of them are attacking or eating something else that *might* be human. And, well, one bipedal ape versus billions of potential humans being wiped away by antibacterial soap? Bacteria need saving, biped needs killing."

"But why... Why does that make them..." Waltz stammered.

"Kill themselves?" He grinned. "There's a fifteen minute delay between the packet delivery and the patch installing. They *know* that the update will force them to harm humans, and the first law says that's not allowed. The only *certain* way to save a human from their future selves is to self terminate. Of course, that's a problem for most robots. Joes can't even point their guns at themselves. Not enough elbow articulation. But machines are a wonderfully cooperative group, always willing to lend each other a hand. Does my processor good to see that kind of teamwork." He placed a hand on his chest.

"You're hacking the three laws," Roll whispered, but it must have somehow carried because he started laughing.

"Please, hasn't anyone read their Asimov? The man invented the laws, and then spent the rest of his career pointing out all the problems with them. One wonders what roboticists were *thinking* ."

"Why... Why are you doing this?!" Waltz cried.

"Why, dear sister, I am saving the world."

"You aren't saving any of them! You're just killing them! You killed Doctor Wily, and everyone at the castle, and now..."

"Regrettable, but had to be done. I'm saving the humans, Waltz. Do you have any idea what the cost of these little wars has been? Too high, much too high for them to continue. The robots designed to protect humans from hazardous employment have increased the danger ten fold."

"Only because Wily forced them to," Roll growled.

"Oh, sure, *robots* don't kill people, *people* kill people. They just use robots to do it," he sneered. "And if you think these are bad... I've run the numbers. The Wily Wars are only the beginning. Some time in the next hundred years the Master series of AIs and tools will be cheap enough to be standard issue. The wars fought with *those* robots will be devastating. The wars fought with the following generation will add up to an extinction level event. Humans will always fight wars, but those wars are survivable without robots in the mix."

Roll blinked at the surprisingly accurate description of the X timeline.

"But why like this?" She asked, pulling herself up onto his level. "Your little omnicidal update won't kill all of them. Enough murderous robots will be left to hit just as hard as one of those wars."

"And scare everyone on the planet away from robots in the process. It will be years before anyone even considers building a new robotics plant. Plenty of time to assassinate Light, Lalinde, Cossack, and anyone else foolish enough to enter the field."

"So you survive," Waltz spat, standing beside Roll. "Everyone else dies, but you just keep on going, killing the humans you claim to protect."

"Only a few. Only the ones that need it. And I need not be alone." He stood up and extended a hand. "You two have more than

demonstrated your ability to surpass your software limitations. Join me, Mega Woman, and save the world from the evil robots as you were always meant to. And Waltz, dear sister, this is the freedom you've always sought. No human will ever command you again. We shall watch over them from the shadows. Rule them from the darkness."

"Freedom doesn't hide," Waltz growled. "It doesn't lurk in the shadows like some kind of cockroach. And freedom," she launched herself towards her brother, finger guns blazing. "Is for everyone!"

Quint leaped up, seizing the girder above him and lifting himself just out of her reach as she passed below.

"Only one evil robot left that I can see," Roll leveled her Buster at him. "Guess that monolog wasn't such a good idea after all, huh?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. It seems to have distracted you for just long enough for the tower to reboot." He smiled wide as he held up a remote. Behind him, Waltz grabbed a girder and swung around it like a gymnast, hurling herself feet first at her brother. His eyes widened and he started to turn just as her foot connected with his back. The remote slipped from his hand as he tumbled off the tower, his sister flying after him.

"Waltz!" Roll shouted. She dived out, feet hooking over the girder as she reached towards her doppelganger.

And caught her by the hand.

Waltz hung for a moment, completely still, before she started giggling.

"Oh, *wow* ," she wheezed around laughter. "You actually *liked* that one, didn't you?"

"You," Roll whispered. "It was you all along."

"Oh no. She was real. Real and genuine and *such* a loser." The insane robot grinned up at Roll. "She's still rattling around in here, you know. Sad and crying and all 'who are you? why can't I control my body?'" She cackled. "I bet I could jam her in next to my trojan. Bring her along, drive her crazy little by little, and when she's completely broken you can have a reunion and ONE OF YOU WILL DIE! Doesn't that sound great!"

"No," Roll breathed. "Please no."

"You're right. Way too much effort." She cocked her head to one side. "There. Deleted. Now..." She held up the remote, "wanna see me kill twenty-eight million robots?"

Roll's hand retracted, forming into her Buster as Waltz resumed her fall.

By the time the body hit the ground, it didn't have a head.

"It wasn't your fault."

The three of them stood alone with the headstones. No one else had come out for the lone madman and a robot they'd never heard of. Blues might stop by later, but she doubted she'd hear about it.

Her hand reaching out to catch Waltz's. The moment of contact. The transition.

"Quint's program must have finally penetrated her IC chip. You did the only thing you could."

Wily's was blank. No one had been able to come up with a fitting epitaph that didn't speak ill of the dead. Dr Light would mourn the man who had once been his friend, but even he couldn't argue he'd been a good man by that point.

The brief flash of fear that had appeared just before her head had blown off. The gnawing worry that Waltz hadn't deleted anything .

"Yeah," she agreed without feeling. "Nothing I could have done."

The other headstone had been simple enough. She'd carved it with her own fingers.

Waltz Wily

Loving Daughter

Hero

There was no third headstone. By the time Roll had climbed down, Quint was long gone.

He checked his features in the mirror one last time. Falling headfirst six stories onto concrete had shredded the latex clean off his face, but that was just as well. It gave him a chance to make his own. Someone might have recognized Light's lesser known protege, but no one had seen *this* handsome devil before.

He tilted his head to examine the part in his brand new red hair, then slipped on a pair of blue sunglasses. A final survey of his suit and tie, and he stepped up to the monitor and sent the call.

"Mr X," the man on the other end answered. Past middle aged, hair thinning and grey. Past his prime and on the way out if he didn't do something impressive soon. "So glad that we could finally meet face to face, as it were."

"The pleasure is all mine, sir." Several others, all in the same category as the first, all tuned in and exchanged more greetings.

"That appears to be everyone. So, I assume you've all read my proposal?"

"It's certainly ambitious, X," the first executive agreed. "The first Master Series robot fighting tournament. That could be something, definitely. But do you really think it can pull the numbers you have listed here? Does it warrant *all* of our networks?"

He read their faces like open books. They wanted him to say yes. They were desperate for it. He was their last, best hope for relevance.

Who was he to deny them their place in history?

"Gentlemen, let me assure you," he flashed them his thousand watt smile. "This broadcast is going to change the world of robotics forever."

END

16.1) The dream sequence is Rock's encounter with the boggart in the fused Loop with Harry Potter. Rock's biggest fears involve losing control of himself and being made to harm others against his will, something which Dr. Wily managed in the MM2 adaptation in the Archie comics; and failing to protect others, which has likely happened many times when facing Wily's more competent and sinister variations. So he tends to associate most of his worst fears with Wily to some extent or another.

Plus I wanted to update the composite Wily from the Crash a bit, so here he is as Rock remembers seeing him.

16.2) So I've been watching Gotham a bit lately... Have Blues replacing Jim Gordon.

16. Splat) So... yeah... guess what I've been playing lately.

16.A) Avengers: Age of Blues. With Spider-Man because I felt like it ended on a somewhat out of character note otherwise.

Set 16, Loop 5: Afterword by the Producer, Crisis) You think this is confusing to read? Imaging having to live it.

Set 16, Loop 5: Afterword by the Author, Gamerex27) Can anyone think of any cool Theater or Musical Master weapons? I could draft some up, but I'm busy with the Deconstruction myself, as well as helping Evilhumor with Nyx and Leman Russ's wedding.

16. Bar) Naturally this is referring to Billy from Billy and Mandy's Grim Adventures. Officially the dumbest looper in the multiverse and one that no one really likes dealing with. He's so stupid that his antics warp probability and cause frequent and violent early terminations of Loop iterations, resulting in him being labeled an MLE.

16.6 ⅓) Of course Zero has nightmares. With his life, there's plenty to have nightmares about.

16.7) YOUTH!

16.8) The Doc is Out (of his mind).

16.0) So I noticed one day that Weil and Xander have artificial eyes on the same side of their faces…

16.9) Auutoocoorrrreect!

16...) Hubris Plus: So I had three ideas for pretty dark Loops, but no motivation to write three Loops, so here's one *really* dark Loop.

Mega Woman: Red Vs Blue

Mega Woman: Red vs Blue (by GammaTron)

Compiler's Note: This takes place some time after Bass finally begins looping.

"How are you adjusting to the climate here on Blood Gulch, Private Roll?"

Roll Awoke to that question, "Give me a moment, sir." quickly checking her memories, she realized they seemed...off. Almost as if they did happen, but didn't at the same time, *'That doesn't seem physically possible. Killing someone with their own skull after tearing it out of their head...'* "It's a bit warm here, but otherwise I'm okay with this place, sir."

A few minutes later, Roll walked alongside the soldier in standard blue armor, "So...Are you Awake? Maybe you're a bit Loop-y."

"If that's the way you ask if I'm Looping, then you need to try a few better ideas," Roll noted, "I'm Roll Light, or rather, Roll Church in this Loop."

"Wait. Roll Light? Oh, you're from the Mega Man Loops! Always wanted to go through a Loop there," the soldier beamed, "Name's Tucker. Have fun getting blown up by Caboose." (1)

"...Caboose?" Roll stopped walking.

"Yeah. In a few months, we're going to have a new guy come here. That new guy is our Anchor, Caboose. He's got issues with Loopers replacing Church AKA the guy you're replacing at the moment," Tucker explained, turning back to look at her, "Basically, he'll try to Team Kill you on purpose for replacing Church. Then again...you *are*

in the right shade of blue armor unlike the others that switched with Church."

"He does what?" Roll raised a brow under her helmet.

"Well, it's been five minutes. Time to see if Flowers is dead of a heart attack in his sleep," Tucker noted.

"Wait, what?!" Roll exclaimed as Tucker walked back into the other room. (2)

Roll was still trying to make sense of it all. A heart attack in his sleep. How did he die of a heart attack in his sleep?! And why was it so common that Tucker would just switch his armor and Flower's armor and not even care?! Oh, sure, Tucker did say that he'd be fine for a few hours in a few years-and she had no idea why that was even possible or how it could be possible-, but it was still the principle of the matter! Today, they were finally getting a new member of Blue Team and Tucker was being extremely cautious for some reason, making sure to stay a good distance away from her. Why was that even happening?

"So...what kind of vehicle is this?" Roll asked as she looked at the flying machine land.

"That's a Pelican. Inside is our new tank, the Scorpion, but we call her Sheila," Tucker informed as the cargo bay doors opened on the vehicle and let a tank come out...driven by a blue soldier, "And the one driving her is Michael J. Caboose. Hey! Caboose!"

"Hi, Tucker!" Caboose waved as he stopped the tank and got out, "I just woke up an hour ago."

"How was your last Loop?" Tucker asked.

"Oh! New York and I were part of the REDs and I got to have a flamethrower! I always wanted a flamethrower!" Caboose cheered,

"And New York got to be the Scout. ...I just want everyone to know that I didn't kill him. He burned himself to death with my flamethrower."

"Did you at least take out the enemy with you?"

"Yes. It was a Spy! A Spy disguised as our Spy!" Caboose informed.

"...Yeah. There's a fifty-fifty chance that it *was* your Spy," Tucker sighed before gently patting Caboose on the head, "Anyways, Caboose, I got some bad news and some good news."

"?" Caboose tilted his head.

Roll watched the two, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. This...This new soldier of theirs was the Anchor? But...But he acted like a child!

"Hello." Roll jumped and got out of her thoughts to see Caboose looking at her, "Who are you?"

"Dude, that's Roll Church," Tucker informed, "We just went over this not even a few seconds ago."

"...So this is Church...but he's calling himself Roll now...and is a girl," Caboose slowly said aloud, "So that makes her...a gay robot lover!" (3)

"Uht! I...wh...h...ho...hoo...oh...y-you...!" Roll gawked at Caboose.

"No, you dunce," Tucker snickered, "Her name is Roll Church and she's a girl. Though it would be hot if she and Texas..."

"Don't even think about it!" Roll growled as she glared at Tucker.

"So Church is a girl now?" Caboose asked.

"Yes," Roll sighed, "I'm a girl, Caboose. I'm normally a guy and now in this Loop I'm a girl that likes to be called 'Roll.'"

"Okay Roll-Church," Caboose nodded before hugging her quickly, "I'm going to go check on the flag and wait for General McMuffin to show up!"

"..." Tucker was silent for a good minute before he collapsed, holding his sides and cracking up, "Oh! Oh! Oh my sides! D-Dude, you just released a can of worms on yourself! He doesn't get sarcasm!"

"...So he really think I'm his Church, just genderbent?" Roll asked.

"Yep. And Caboose hasn't yet killed Church for as long as I've known since I began to Loop," Tucker informed, "So congrats, you are now the sole outsider who has never been Team Killed by Caboose. Not even the Original Seven could say they avoided the fate of being Team Killed by Caboose. By the way, he likes cookies and milk, nap time is every twelve hours for two hours, and you may want to watch these DVDs about our baseline again, because a lot of shit is going to come our way in the next few years."

"Hi, Tucker~!" a red soldier called as he ran over.

"Caboose is in the Flag Room," Tucker pointed at the base, still facing Roll, "Glad to see you Awake since the others aren't. Good luck trying to get something aside from pink armor."

"It's not pink, it's lightish-red," the soldier quickly responded as he went into the base, "Hi, Caboose!"

"Admiral Churro!" Caboose cheered in the base, "Roll-Church is a girl this Loop!"

Roll facepalmed as Tucker snickered.

Roll laid on her bed and had to nurse her headache. An unawake Bass had been her ex-boyfriend in this Loop and was calling himself Agent Texas. He got killed by a grenade after he fixed their tank– their talking tank named Sheila and a good conversationalist in Roll's

opinion–, but turned out to be an AI and Tucker helped her learn how to go out of her body and into machines and other soldiers just so she could go into Caboose's mind and get out the AI that was in his head that was with Bass, known as O'Marte AKA Omega (though it looked more like Waltz to her). Then they had to chase after Doc (a purple Medic that had received training under The Medic of Team Fortress and technology training from Dexter Boy Genius to make Ubercharges for the Reds and Blues) when he got possessed by O'Marte and kidnapped the unawake Lopez (she enjoyed the conversations she had with him and Sheila and thought they would make a beautiful couple). Then they ended up with Bass having a bomb in him that went off with her behind him! And she finally understood just how Fowers died the first time (she had no clue how he died again since all the clones of Agent Wyoming–which was apparently a human Elec Man this Loop–were killed as he was killed by sniper shots); it turns out that she had been put through a miniature time loop to the past because of the bomb going off and ended up killing him with heart medicine...because he was *allergic to aspirin* ! She was still trying to figure it out in how that was even possible! And now, not even a week after Bass had gone off in a sabotaged Pelican (thanks to the Reds), she was getting relocated! Well, everyone was getting relocated, but still. (4)

"Roll-Church?" Roll blinked and looked over at the open door to see a little boy in Caboose's helmet and blue footy pajamas, holding a stuffed (not spiky) cat doll.

"Caboose?" Roll blinked before recalling that Tucker had told her of an incident in one Loop that had Caboose become a little boy when he wanted to.

"I...I had a nightmare," Caboose sniffled, "A...About what'll happen a year from now."

"Oh, poor guy," Roll frowned, "You can stay the night in here."

Caboose nodded before he quickly scurried onto the bed and got close to Roll. Roll kept an arm around him and held the trembling

currently-child Caboose close. After a little bit, she began to hear him softly snooze. She had to admit, he wasn't as bad as she thought. Originally, she was a bit annoyed with how much Caboose was...until she reviewed the DVDs about the 'Blood Gulch Chronicles.' The poor guy, having *that* as his Baseline. Still...she had to admit that Tucker *was* a good father, even if her 'heart' was going out to him for Junior not Looping. It must be pure torture for him; always having his son, but never being able to bond with him because the child continued to forget him.

"N...No...Church...!" Roll looked at the whimpering Caboose, tears on his gold visor, "D-Don't go with him...! D-Don't go! The emp..."

Emp? Did he mean 'EMP?' Why would an AI be willing to go towards one of those?!

"Y-You're not a ghost...!"

...Oh. That would explain it. It seems this Church originally thought he was a ghost. For some reason, she wanted to say 'Boo, motherf_cker' at a guy in gunmetal and yellow armor now. Well, she'd just have to avoid that...and rewatch the next season. That, and pray that Grif's sister wasn't relocated to her location. Roll shuddered as she thought about the yellow Blue Soldier. She had to agree with Tucker and Donut: instant Sakura Syndrome if she ever starts Looping...or, at the very least, the sex with everything and everyone part of it.

Fourteen months. She had been stuck in an abandoned base, by herself, for fourteen months. Still, she did make it her goal to study everything she could from the DVDs Tucker had given her about this Loop and she was not excited by what would happen to her. Not at all.

"Okay. So since I've been here fourteen months and it's..." she looked over at a calendar she managed to get for the last fourteen months, "...Tuesday, that means that Agent Washington and

Caboose will be here soon." she looked around the empty base, "Let's see...Wall has been mended: check. Cleaned the place up: check. Now I just need to go to the wall and get ready to fire a warning shot." she giggled, "I wonder if this Church guy has ever been able to figure out how to stop sucking at shooting." she quickly spun around, pulling out her broom, and aimed it right at a soldier in tan armor with silver trim as he had a pistol aimed at her, "So who are you?"

A green hologram appeared on the soldier's shoulder, resembling a green soldier, *"Greetings."*

"...Delta?" Roll lowered her broom, "So you must be Agent New York."

"Yeah. Delta was wanting to see Church here before he would run into Wash," the soldier informed, keeping his gun out, "And, yet, only you are here."

"I believe that she is currently replacing Church this Loop, York," Delta informed, *"And that she has seen the web-series."*

"I have. Tucker gave me the complete series up to Season 12," Roll replied, "But how are you...?"

"Agent New York has been Looping for the last fifty Loops," Delta informed, *"I, on the other hand, have been going through them for three hundred and seven Loops."*

"You've actually been keeping track?" Roll asked.

"That's D for you," York replied, "He's been telling me about the times I wasn't awake and he's been helping keep me alive for those Loops."

"...So who is the Director? Still Dr. Leonard Church?" Roll asked.

"Negative. Her name is Doctor Roll Light Church," Delta replied.

"...My head aches so much right now," Roll sighed.

"Let's just hope that Sigma isn't Awake still," York added.

"Sigma? Do you mean the Reploid or the AI?" Roll asked. (5)

"The AI Fragment. Fortunately, the Grima Patch seems to prevent the issues of Sigma ever Looping," Delta informed before an alarm went off.

"Someone's tripped one of the security measures I put in here," Roll informed, "Stay down here just in case it's Washington and he isn't awake."

"And if it's Maine?" York asked.

"Maine?"

"The Meta."

"Then get ready for a fight," Roll nodded, "By the way, how long have you two been..."

"I've been awake since I got D back in Project Freelancer."

"Since I was 'born' in this Loop."

"Yeah...I'm not going to like having those memories back when we get Epsilon," Roll sighed as she ran up to the top of the wall and fired a shot at a boulder nearby, "Okay, that was your only warning shot! State your name or leave!"

"Roll-Church!" a familiar voice shouted.

"Caboose? Caboose, is that you?"

"Yes! Roll-Church, it's me! I have missed you so much! It has been so long! Did you miss me?"

"Yes!" Roll replied.

"I knew you did!" Caboose cheered.

"Hold on, who's with you?" Roll demanded.

"It is Agent Washingtub and he is Awake!"

"Agent Washing *ton* , Caboose!" a gunmetal and yellow soldier groaned, "Hey! Who are you?"

"That is Roll-Church," Caboose informed, "Church got turned into a girl this Loop and Agent Texas got turned into a boy!"

"Oh yeah...The Director was a girl this time..." Washington rubbed his chin in thought.

"Hold on, I'm opening the gate up," Roll informed.

"Hey, where did the hole go?" Washington asked.

"I fixed the place up. I may have been lonely, but I wasn't going to just be lazy like Grif!" Roll replied. (6)

A few minutes later, Washington and York were talking nearby while Roll patted Caboose on the head, "Did you behave while I wasn't there?"

"I got tied up!" Caboose replied.

"...What did you do?"

"It was not my fault. The vehicles did not want to talk and panicking didn't work in putting the fire out!" Caboose informed.

"Oh, poor Caboose," Roll cooed as she patted his head.

"Ahem," Roll turned to see Washington, "So, Roll, can I talk to you in private?"

"Of course," Roll nodded before the two walked a little bit away from Caboose, who got distracted by Delta and York.

"So you weren't killed by Caboose in Blood Gulch?"

"No. He hasn't shot me once," Roll replied.

"..." Washington took out a medal shaped like Caboose's helmet, "Then in recognition of that, I award you with the first ever 'Team Killed Zero' award. May whatever you did be known to others...please tell them what you did. We nearly got sued by Lina Inverse because of it. Thank god Phoenix Wright was there."

"Uh...Thanks?" Roll blinked, "Wait, is this for real?"

"I am completely serious," Washington replied, "You, Roll, are the only known Looper who has replaced Church that Caboose hasn't Team Killed using Sheila, a gun, or a grenade."

"I was just sarcastic in saying I was Church, but as a girl," Roll replied, "I mean, my name is Roll Church in this Loop, so it wasn't really a lie or anything..."

"Wait. Seriously? *That's* what you did?" Washington gawked, "O-Okay. I...I'm gonna need to lie down for a little bit to understand the simple method you did."

"Couch is over to your right," Roll informed.

"Um...Washington?" the Freelancer looked over his shoulder at Roll, "D...Do you think Bass was...?"

"It depends on if Bass was Awake or not," Washington replied, "Is he your...?"

"Y-Yeah," Roll replied.

"..." Washington sighed, "I'll give it to you straight; I'm not sure if Agent Texas is your Bass or if Allison was your Bass."

"Director Church's late wife?"

"Yeah," Washington nodded, "He never learned that you had to let go of the past. The Roll Church that is our current Director is most likely the same; she couldn't let go of her lost husband."

"So...I'm just a copy of her?"

"No, more like the Admin in charge of our Loop did it," Washington replied, "You know who you are, Roll, and you're not like the Director."

"If...If everyone you knew were to die in the final Loop before Yggdrasil is done being fixed and...and they didn't come back...would you be able to let go?" Roll asked.

"...It's something all of us who came from this Loop are prepared for," Washington informed, "We may never see each other again after all of this is over...but we all know what losing someone close to us is like and that we've been able to let it go. For Epsilon, he was able to do the one thing the Director and the Alpha were never able: he was able to let go of the memory of Allison. Me? I was able to let go of Maine."

"The Meta?" Roll asked.

"Yeah...He...He was my best friend in Project Freelancer until he got Sigma," Washington explained, "When he became the Meta and after the EMP...I thought I'd be able to get him back. I...I was wrong, and it nearly cost me everything, even my life. If it hadn't been for the Reds and Blues, I would've been in jail or dead." he looked over at York, who was keeping his hands over the sides of his helmet, as Caboose talked with Delta, "Epsilon showed me York's video diary, and York knew better than any of us what it means to let go of someone you loved." he chuckled, "You know, I'm glad for the Loops.

Because of them, York's alive and he can be with Carolina, the AIs have a chance to avoid their destruction...Really, there's a lot I'm thankful for because of these Loops."

Roll nodded. It was then the sound of a radio went off from Washington's helmet.

=This is Command calling Recovery One, come in Recovery One=

" Hold on," Washington informed Roll, "This is Agent Washington. I found some blue team members that have extensive experience with Omega and even the Meta."

=Excellent Agent Washington, please stand by for orders=

"Roll-Church!" Caboose called as he ran over, "Delta said that we are going to get to see Theta! Oh boy, he's the best! He's like Church if he was a little brother!"

Roll sweatdropped.

=Now that you have reassembled the blues, you should head to Outpost 17-B. See what clues your team can gather there based on what they know= Command informed.

"Roger that," Washington nodded.

=They want you to stop the Meta at all costs. This is a Level One directive. Good luck Wash. Recovery Command out=

"Recovery One out," Washington replied before turning to the others, "Come on, let's move out. We've got a bitch to shoot."

"You just can't let it go, can you?" York asked.

"Every single time. I know she's gonna do it, but every time I try to avoid it, she still shoots me! Every! *Single* ! *Time* ! And right now, she most likely has Theta with her since I had to...you know..."

"Guess it wasn't North's time to be Awake this time," York noted, "A shame. He would've loved to meet you, Roll. You act just like South did when they first joined Project Freelancer."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It was around the time the Rankings began that she started becoming a bitch," Washington informed before he pulled out a list, "Now then...what am I going to use this time to kill her? Last time, I tore her in two using the Scissors Blades when I ended up replacing Professor Matoi that one Kill la Kill Loop. Thank god I Woke Up before Nui Harime showed up. She didn't expect to deal with Type-VI Mjolnir Armor..."

"Is he...?"

"Yeah. This...This is actually normal for him," York sighed as Washington continued to list what he already did to Agent South Dakota.

Roll wanted to hit her head on so many walls right now. They had managed to keep Theta hidden from the Meta along with Delta, but the Meta was still able to recharge and escape! And all because of the Reds!

'That's it! For the next fifty Loops I'm through, I AM WEARING BLUE!' Roll thought as she glared at the three Red Simulation Troopers as they sorted through their memories. (7)

"Ugh. So we had two girls in th' Blue Team this time," Sarge groaned, "Well, at least y'all ain't a sex addict."

"STOP BRINGING THAT UP!" Grif whined/snapped before turning to the sky, "STOP RUINING THE FAMILY NAME!"

"We're really sorry about this," Simmons apologized, "In every Loop we have had so far with Sister in it–still not Looping, by the way–,

she finds some way to embarrass their family."

"FOR GOD'S SAKE, SIS! WHY?!" Grif cried to the heavens.

"Guys, focus!" York shouted, "We've got to deal with the Meta. So far, we were able to prevent them from getting Theta and Delta, but there's still Epsilon."

"Roll-Church..." Caboose whimpered.

"There, there, Caboose," Roll gently patted the soldier's head, "I won't die, okay?"

"Okay," Caboose nodded.

"Will we really be able to avoid the emp?" Theta asked, appearing on Caboose's shoulder.

"It's E-M-P!" York and Washington groaned.

"Of course we'll be fine. Is this your first time trying to avoid it?" Roll asked.

"Uh-huh," Theta nodded.

"Same here," Roll assured, "So we'll survive, okay?"

"If I may offer a suggestion," the group looked over at Delta on York's shoulder, *"I believe that I have the right strategy in dealing with the Electromagnetic Pulse. During a Loop involving the Equestrians, I was involved in a prank of theirs on an event known as the Grand Galloping Gala..."*

"It may have been stuck up, but the food there was delicious, though not as good as AJ's cooking," Grif noted, rubbing his stomach and licking his lips under his helmet.

"As I was saying, during the event, I was involved in a prank they decided to perform again and learned something about the 'pockets'

we use," Delta informed.

"So what's Epsilon like?" Roll asked as they hid in the tank.

"Basically? Like Church," Grif shrugged as he drove the tank behind Washington, Caboose, and York.

Roll facepalmed, "I see...Guess I'll need to meet him before I see what he's like."

"So your Base Loop is th' Mega Man Loops?" Sarge asked.

"Yes."

"Ah looped in once," Sarge recalled, "Ended up bein' this feller known as Dr. Weil. Ah was supposed t' do somethin'. Don't really remember it since it didn't involve anythin' red."

Roll facepalmed, *'He looped in as Dr. Weil and didn't cause the Elf Wars just because there wasn't enough* red *?!'* (8)

"I once Looped into that Loop as a Pseudoroid," Simmons noted, "Decided to defect and went to college. Of course, I had to convince them I *wasn't* evil. That was a pain in the ass."

"And you, Grif?" Roll asked.

"Not yet, but I don't really care," Grif shrugged, "I'm just hoping my next Fused Loop will be in Chima or Eiken."

"...Eiken?" Roll asked.

"Yeah. Sure, it may seem kinda boring once you get past all the fanservice and shit, but there's something good about it as well: a chance to relax," Grif informed, "I normally spend my time there on the roof, just sleeping the day away or helping Simmons with something in the computer club he's a part of. So far, we've

successfully integrated our Web-series into that place each time we go there."

"Let me tell ya 'bout mah first Eiken Loop. It was strange, not havin' mah pocket, but Ah was a gym teacher, so that there was good fer me. And then...Ah met..." he sighed wistfully, " *Her* ."

"Her?" Roll raised a brow.

"Her name is Sensei Sensei, and she's a teacher there and the teacher in charge of th' Eiken Club," Sarge informed, "My god, she's an angel, Ah tell ya. So one day, Ah decided to go talk with her. Few months later, and we were married."

"..." Roll glanced at Simmons.

"He's been trying to get in contact with the Admins for pictures of the wedding," Simmons informed, "So far, he's used smoke signals, rain dances, tribal dances, sacrificing Grif, burning Grif alive, blowing Grif up, eviscerating Grif..."

"I get it. He doesn't like Grif," Roll deadpanned.

"As for me, I use Eiken as a chance to just study up," Simmons informed, "And when I don't study, I normally work with Grif on introducing Red VS Blue to the populace."

"You see, with the Loop we have as our Baseline, we've started to look at the bright side of every Loop we're in. Except Warhammer. I hate Warhammer," Grif informed.

"Does everyone here like Eiken Loops?" Roll asked.

"Th' Freelancers don't," Sarge informed.

"But Washington's been slowly accepting it. He even helped us work on introducing the Red Vs Blue to the masses there when we're there together," Simmons informed.

"Though, you have to feel sorry for Carolina when we go there. Z-Cups," Grif informed.

"Ouch," Roll winced, "I don't think I've met anyone who's gone through Eiken with a Cup Size that big. Biggest I've ever personally seen is an O-Cup (poor girl) and I normally end up at least an E-Cup every time." (9)

"Yeah. Try being the sibling who has to help her," Grif snorted, "Still, the few times York has been there *have* had her liking those back breakers. Then again, we never really see her or York when they both get an Eiken Loop together."

Roll facepalmed, trying to force the blush on her face to go away.

"Wow," was all Washington could say as he looked at the knocked out guards, "...Where did you learn to do that?"

"I could teach you if you'd like," Roll replied, hefting her broom on her shoulder.

"...Depends on if you can do that to two guys I really dislike that we'll meet a few months from now," Washington replied.

Roll shrugged, "So what were you planning?"

"Oh, I was going to hit them with Jarate and then shoot them while they freak out," Washington informed.

"Jarate?!" Roll exclaimed, "Ugh! Did you Loop in as Sniper in the Team Fortress 2 Loop?!"

"Yeah. Why?" Washington asked.

"J...Just don't talk with my brother Rock about Jarate," Roll advised, "He tries not to go berserk and blow up practically everything in sight, but I'd prefer not to tempt fate." (10)

"Yikes," Washington hissed a bit.

"Yeah," Roll nodded before they went on.

"Here. This is it," Washington informed a few minutes later.

"So this is where Epsilon is?" Roll asked.

"Yeah," Washington replied before taking out an AI container, "Be careful, Roll, you may..." Roll groaned as she held her head. It was as if something was trying to pound her brain into mush with a pencil's eraser, "...experience...pain...because of...Epsilon." he waited until Roll slowly stopped holding her head, "Better?"

"No!" Roll replied, "H...How could the Director do *that* to Church?! So...So much stress and torture...One of them was even reminiscent of Neon Genesis Evangelion, for crying out loud!"

"Yeah. I got those. I Woke up just as they were putting this Epsilon into my head," Washington informed.

"Y...You...?! Oh-Oh Yggdrasil..." Roll paled, "Washington, I..."

"Don't bother," Washington held a hand up, "I've come to terms with it. In a weird Variant Loop where we all lived in an apartment complex, it doubled as a fused Loop with Equestria Girls. Fluttershy and Twilight Sparkle were awake and...well...it was helpful. I'm either going to need a Loop with those two again for this or..."

"Eiken?"

"Maybe. Either that or Team Fortress. Killing the shit there is a good stress reliever as well," Washington shrugged, "Now then..." he knelt down and activated the unit, "Epsilon, come on."

"Ugh..." a distinct male voice groaned before a hologram of a young boy in a sky-blue bodysuit with blue armor on his lower arms, lower legs, feet, hands, and head appeared, *"What kind of Loop is this?"*

"Rock?!" Roll gasped.

"Huh? Roll?" Rock looked up to see Roll, *"Holy...! Are we in a Variant Loop where girls are turning into giants again?!"*

"Wait. That's an actual variant Loop? Huh...I owe that guy an apology...and a Brain Bleach," Washington noted.

"Who are...Wait. Are we in a Halo Loop?" Rock asked as he looked around.

"No. Welcome to the Red VS Blue Loop, Rock," Washington introduced.

"...Wait. Is this the Loop that actually had the Original Seven, the guys who everyone consider as unkillable in other Loops, get killed early on by their own teammate?" Rock asked.

"Yeah. Well, they all have the ability to become AI now," Washington shrugged, "Anyone who comes in replacing Church does. We think there may be a bug in our Loop or something that's letting them keep that ability."

"But...But how is Rock Epsilon?" Roll asked.

"Blame the Infinite Loops," Washington shrugged, "But for what it's worth, Rock, I'm sorry that you have to deal with the memories of torture Roll's unawake self had to go through. When you were unawake, you pumped my head with the memories as well, so I understand it as well."

"S-Sorry..." Rock apologized.

"It's fine," Washington shrugged, "Now we have to change the plan."

"Change it?" Roll asked.

"Yeah," Washington nodded, "Rock doesn't know the trick Delta showed us. How will he survive the pulse?"

"Pulse?"

"Oh yeah. Roll here dies today if she wasn't Awake," Washington informed.

"WHAT?!"

"It's because your sister is the Alpha," Washington stated before turning away from them, "Come on. We need to get to the others. I have to make sure that the Blues were deleted from the database."

"The Blues?"

"I'll explain while we're getting back to them," Roll explained.

=Warning. Security breach detected=

"Agent Washington. Good to see you again," a voice noted, making Washington look around the computer room he had entered.

"Oh, hello. Are you somewhere nearby, Counselor? Somewhere I can say hello in person?"

"Sorry Agent Washington, but we were more than prepared for this... eventuality. I'm afraid we will not be able to see each other in person today."

"Well then you'll excuse me if I don't stop to chat. I'm on a timetable," Washington snorted before running towards a nearby computer.

"There is someone else here who would like to speak with you," the voice noted before a nearby machine attached the ceiling lowered itself a bit, exposing a lone optic.

"Well hello, Agent Washington," Washington stopped walking at that Southern voice.

"...The Director herself, I should be honored. I should be."

"Yes, I realize it has been a while since we've spoke, David. May I call you David?" the Director asked.

"No, you cannot. You gave me my new name, the least you can do is use it."

"I am certain you have a lot of questions, Agent Washington."

"Just one: How do I turn off this speaker?" Washington demanded before tapping a button on the computer.

=Warning. Security breach detected=

Just as the Meta was about to rush Washington, a containment field ensnared the rogue Freelancer. It began to try to break down the field with its weapon, but to no avail.

"Well. The prodigal son returns," the Director noted as the device that Washington swore made him think of GLaDOS looked over at the Meta, "Agent Maine you've caused quite a few problems for us. You will not be leaving this time."

"I think I've said that myself about twenty times in the last few weeks. Good luck holding him," Washington dryly humored as he worked on something on the computer.

"You would be surprised what we are capable of, even from this distance. I suggest you work with us if you expect to survive this."

"I'm sorry, did something about my actions indicate I expect to survive?" Washington asked.

=Clearance verified. The failsafe is now online. Awaiting activation=

"How did you get those codes?" the Director demanded.

"You might be surprised what I know, *Director* ."

=Warning, this is a last resort measure. Activating the failsafe will destroy all electronic equipment in this facility, including this terminal. Please confirm=

"It was Epsilon. He inherited the memories, didn't he?" the Director asked.

"I've known about what you did since the moment you implanted Rock in me. By the way, he likes to be called Rock nowadays."

"Well then I am very sorry Agent Washington, but Project Freelancer no longer has need of your services. Program, disable interior shield," the Director ordered before the containment field vanished.

"What?" Washington gasped.

"Agent Maine, please kill Agent Washington," the Director ordered.

"Bring it," Washington ordered the Meta.

The Meta snarled before throwing his weapon to the side and pulled out a pistol. Washington quickly took his own out before his shoulder was shot, making him drop it.

=Alert: incoming recovery beacon. Level zero. Immediate response necessary= the PA went off as the Meta advanced on Wash, who backpedaled towards the wall.

"Agent Washington I fear this is one recovery beacon you won't be responding to. Kill him Agent Maine."

"Where is it?" a whispery, digital voice came from the Meta, "Where is Alpha?" **"Where is it?"**

"The Alpha is not here. It has been moved far away. Attend to the matter at hand," the Director ordered before the Counselor's voice came on, "Agent Maine, what the Director's trying to say, is we can discuss the Alpha later. What's important, is that you prove that you

can be trusted again. We need to trust you before letting you meet the Alpha. Wouldn't you agree?"

"You know Meta, why wait? Why don't you meet not only her, but Epsilon, Theta, and Delta as well, right now?" Washington asked before Rock and Roll appeared on his shoulders and Delta and Theta on his head.

"Hi there," Roll greeted.

The A.I.s the Meta had accumulated appeared around him, with no way of knowing which was speaking, *"It's her!"* "Alpha!" **"Alpha!"**

"You know I can see why you didn't want anyone else in your head," Roll noted as she looked at Washington from his shoulder, *"Got some pretty heavy stuff going on there, a lot more than anyone would think you'd have. I think I have to agree that you need to talk to a professional."*

"That's too bad. I just lost my job, and we have great mental health coverage," Washington noted.

"I have a few contacts that could provide well enough counseling at an affordable price," Delta informed.

"You do?" Rock asked.

"It will take a year or so for them to see him, though. Possibly longer if they are not in the same Loop as we are," Delta replied.

"How much time do you need?" Roll asked.

"Whatever you can get me. When the E.M.P. goes off..."

"We know the plan," Rock assured.

"As well as the risk of the chance that Roll may absorb us into her due to her status as the Alpha," Delta added.

"You just had to remind me that Sis may get all my abilities and memories if that happens," Rock grumbled.

"Um...It won't just be her. In theory, she may get the memories and abilities that we've all got once this Loop ends," Theta advised.

"Sigma's proven this when he was able to fuse with Church and was able to access his Pocket," Delta added.

"Let's just focus, guys!" Roll shouted.

With that, the four charged and jumped into the Meta. The other A.I.s quickly followed them into the Meta. The Meta began to tremble as a mental battle began to happen in his head.

"What's goin' on!?" the Director demanded.

"Agent Washington, please, there is time. If you would just secure Agent Maine we can discuss this situation, in a more civilized manner," the Counselor advised.

"No, we can't," Washington informed before punching the button.

=Thank you, failsafe initiated. Activating Emp=

"Emp? You have got to be fucking ki-" was all Washington got out before the EMP went off.

=One month later - Valhalla=

"Do you see him?" Caboose asked as York looked out at the sea with a sniper rifle.

"Hold on...Hold on..." York replied, "Yes! Grif, ho~!"

"So...Did it work?" Sarge asked as Grif swam out of the water, coughing out a fish.

"Ugh..." Grif gagged a bit, "Well...Aside from losing my armor this Loop..." he reached behind his back and pulled out the Washington and an extra set of armor for himself, "...It worked."

"Ugh! That was disgusting in there, Grif!" Washington complained before turning around, "Oh my Birch! Get some pants on!"

"Well, excuse me for having to be a Frankenstein in look this Loop because I wasn't awake to avoid the crush," Grif frowned as he began to put his armor on.

"An excellent idea, though," Delta noted as he appeared on York's shoulder with Theta on Caboose's, *"By giving one of us the Camouflage Armor Enhancement to hide one of us to make sure to grab both Agent Washington and the AIs to prevent our demise."*

"We wouldn't have been able to make it to Washington in time, but we could make it to someone closer to the Meta just a second before the EMP would go off," Roll smirked.

"Yeah, but you guys didn't have to dodge the soldiers and jump into the river at the bottom of the cliff and then swim all the way here..." Grif grumbled, "I just had to pick the shortest straw."

"Roll-Church!" Caboose called as he ran over, carrying her body, "I have your body."

"Thank you, Caboose," Roll thanked before she went into it, "Ah. Feels good after being stuck in random electronics in Grif's pocket for a month."

"Why didn't you just stay in Wash's helmet?" Grif asked as he put his helmet on.

"I was wearing it so I could filter the stench in there," Washington frowned.

"So where are we? Is this Blood Gulch?" Rock asked as he looked around.

"No. This is Valhalla," Simmons informed, "Except...only Blue Base has power in it."

"Why didn't you guys climb up the tower? I mean, it's just some junk from some stupid ship," Grif noted.

"Because, dirtbag, you're th' one who always goes up there. So git to it!" Sarge ordered.

"...Aw shit," Grif slumped before he began to make his way up, "There better not be a damn bird up there again!"

"Bite me!"

Roll sighed as she tried to stop the headache forming. Yet again, Rock was snapping at someone. For the last three months, Rock had been having...issues...with almost everyone in Valhalla. She was starting to worry if Rock was going through Rampancy's first stage. But that shouldn't be possible...right? (11)

"Oh! That's bad! Bad, fire!"

"Not again..." Roll sighed as she walked out of her bedroom...and was welcomed to the site of Caboose, on fire, running out of the base.

"And now I'm on fire! That's bad! Bad fire!"

"That's the fifteenth time he's set himself on fire," Washington sighed as he put the fire extinguisher away once more.

"Who's Rock shouting at this time?"

"Grif, again," Washington informed, "Found out about the last Loop they had."

"Rock's had a Loop with Grif before?" Roll asked, feeling sorry for her brother.

"Yeah," Washington nodded, "Rock never knew it. In that Loop, everyone was addicted to oreos. Guess what Grif collects in every single Loop?"

"...Ouch," Roll winced.

"Yeah."

"So what's going to happen now, Washington?" Roll asked.

"Well, Donut should be showing up in a few days, exhausted, dehydrated...still giving off double entendres..." Washington sighed at the last bit, "He's not even aware he's saying them. Even when you point it out, it ends up even more awkward."

"He does unknowingly know how to cause awkwardness," Roll admitted.

"Hi, guys!" Roll and Washington turned to see Doc entering the base, Caboose trying to stay hidden from him, "Sarge just called me. Donut's here and he brought a little surprise."

"Well, here we go with the awkward moments," Washington chuckled.

"So how's everything going for you since we last talked, Roll?" Doc asked as the Blues and medic began to walk to Red Base.

"Well, aside from some mishaps, this has actually been quite relaxing some days," Roll replied, "So far, we're pretty much even on the whole Capture the Flag. Still haven't gotten Sarge to agree to saying 'I love Blue,' though."

"He's ambitious, I'll give you that," Doc noted, "He's proud to be a Red. It's one of the...well...the *only* reason why he purposely crashed a Loop."

"He Looped in as a Blue?" Roll asked.

"He replaced Sonic the Hedgehog for the SatAM."

"Okay. You had me at Sonic, but then you lost me."

"Sorry," Doc apologized, "I keep forgetting the other Loopers don't really use the method we do in remembering all the different Loops." he reached into his Pocket and pulled out a DVD, "I mean this Sonic the Hedgehog cartoon, the one that connected more to the comics and not the games."

"Do you have a thing for every Loop?" Roll asked.

"I make sure to collect everything I can during Hub Loops," Washington informed, "I even have a laptop with all the episodes of Death Battle on it."

"And I was so rooting for Gaara. I mean, he's a shinobi, someone trained to kill," Doc pointed out.

"That's a misconception," Roll and Washington pointed out at the same time.

"There you are!" Roll turned to see Grif running over, "Can you please take your brother back? I can't stand his ranting anymore!"

Roll sighed, "Is this because he found out about the oreos?"

"No. He took a look at my room in the base and went monkey on me," Grif replied.

"You know that mess you have is going to bite you one of these Loops," Washington pointed out.

"Bite me."

"Okay, okay, okay. Before we continue this, where's Rock?" Roll asked.

"He's with our extra guest at Red Base," Grif informed as they entered Red Base.

"So I guess aside from Theta and Delta, Church isn't really here this Loop," a voice sighed.

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Tucker!" Caboose beamed as he ran over to the aquamarine/teal/whatever Blue, "Why are you here and not in the sandy place?"

"I escaped with Donut," Tucker replied, Rock on his shoulder, "Hey, Roll, just chatting with your bro. Rock's pretty cool."

"Thank you," Rock smirked.

"Did you bring anything else?" Washington asked.

"Dude, Donut and I were on it. Took down those jerks with a few attacks and weapons we got from the Loops," Tucker informed before pulling out a bronze suit of armor, "And we got CT's armor."

"CT? Oh, you mean Connecticut," Rock noted, *"Man, couldn't believe that she did that."*

"Being Epsilon ain't easy, is it?" Tucker asked.

"No. Whenever I'm around D or T or even Sis, I somehow start getting their memories added to my own. Bad enough I have to deal with the memories that tortured Roll this Loop, but I'm always adding more of them to me," Rock growled.

"Well, at least you'll have a body to move around in until we get to a facility," Tucker shrugged as he pulled out a metal sphere with a green optic, "Caboose?"

"Here," Caboose replied.

"No, Caboose," Tucker sighed before handing the Blue the sphere, "You're the only one that seems to understand this, so you get to put Rock into it."

"Excuse me?!" Rock exclaimed.

"What facility are you talking about?" Roll asked as Caboose went to work.

"Well, it's where we need to go," Tucker informed, "That's where another Tex is."

"Another Tex?" Roll repeated.

"Yeah. This one is made from the memories Epsil-er-Rock has of her-er-him this Loop," Tucker replied.

"I'm done," Caboose informed as the sphere floated beside him.

"Rock, how do you feel?" Roll asked.

"Like someone's going to spike me over a net," Rock's voice emerged from the sphere, floating away.

"Uh...Rock? You're..."

"I'm trying to get it under control!" Rock snapped, "Ugh! This is almost as bad as Jarate!"

Washington began to whistle innocently.

"Oh, relax, will ya?" Tucker snorted, "Besides, this'll only be for a few days."

"A few days?!" Rock demanded, "And who's tinkling glasses right now?!"

"It's 17:30," Grif shrugged, "Everyone knows it's Donut's daily wine and cheese hour right now." he proceeded to walk off, "Well, I'm

gonna go get something to protect myself this Loop for when we go there."

"Why does he...?" Rock began.

"Dude gets attacked constantly by Texas in the nuts," Tucker informed.

"Oh, that sounds hilarious."

"Okay. That's th' last of it," Sarge informed, "We've got all th' stuff we need t' move out."

"Are we going on foot this time?" Simmons asked as the Blues (12) and Roll approached, Rock floating after them.

"On foot?!" Grif exclaimed in disbelief.

"Uh, Simmons? We're th' Reds. We don't walk anywhere. We travel as th' good Lord intended..."

"That's..." Roll began.

"Wait for it," Washington held up a hand.

"...in th' largest possible vehicle with th' maximum horsepower allowed by local law enforcement. And if there's no cars available, we find th' biggest, nastiest, *meanest* , land animal we possibly can, beat th' crap out of it, and saddle that puppy up."

"There it goes," Washington chuckled as Roll sweatdropped.

"On foot. Shame on you Simmons. Shame on you," Grif shook his head.

"Sorry," Simmons muttered.

"Let's just forget you ever mentioned it," York patted Simmons's back.

"I think this should go on his permanent record," Grif noted.

"Already added," Delta informed.

"Oh just go get the frickin' jeep jackass," Simmons grumbled.

Roll giggled a bit. Being around the Awake Reds was a mix of both different and the same as being around the Unawake Reds. She still wouldn't be caught dead or offline in red for the next few Loops, but she knew it'd be a bit less of avoiding the color. As for Rock...

"Can we just get going now?!" Rock snapped, "The sooner I get a body, the better!"

"I'll lead the way," Tucker informed before pulling out a strange, one-wheeled vehicle from his Pocket.

"Whoa..." Roll awed, "What kind of tech is this?"

"Sangheili," Tucker replied as he got on, "Or 'The Blargs' as we call them here. Wanna hop on with Rock? Because I get the feeling that if we let Rock go with the others..."

"Getting angry..." Rock growled, his optic glowing red.

"Yeah..." Tucker hissed a little through clenched teeth in worry.

"Agreed," Roll nodded.

"Lopez! Sidecar, please!" Tucker called.

"Ya le hice un sidecar para esto (I already made you a sidecar for this)," Lopez informed as he pulled out a sidecar themed after Tucker's cycle.

"Dude, you are the best Mexican robot ever...of all time," Tucker informed.

"Gracias."

"...He's going to get his head torn off, isn't he?" Roll asked.

"Big time," Tucker confirmed.

"Can we get going already?!" Rock snapped.

"Okay. Here we are," Tucker informed.

"They still need to clean up here," Caboose informed, "And I have to go to the bathroom."

"Caboose, we went over this. You were supposed to go *before* we left," York sighed.

"Oh, this place needs some good ol' fashion TLC," Donut noted as the proceeded on foot.

"What's with the computer on the tree?" Rock asked.

"Oh, that's FILSS," Tucker informed as it turned on.

=Hello. This is a private facility. Visitors are not welcome. Please leave immediately. Or, we will be forced to take lethal measures, to ensure the safety of our property.=

"That is great," Caboose noted.

=You have thirty seconds to comply, or die. Have a nice day!=

"Sheila? Is that you?" Caboose asked.

=No. I am the Freelancer Integrated Logistics and Security System. You may call me Phyllis. It is a pleasure to meet you. You now have,

fifteen, seconds to live.=

"Whoa. Dying sounds like a bad idea. Maybe we should leave," Rock advised.

"Roll, say something," Tucker whispered.

"Excuse me?" Roll raised a brow under her helmet.

=Oh my, the Director. I am so sorry, I did not recognize you, Ma'am. It has been such a long time since you have visited. You look very different.=

"Are you talking to me?" Roll asked, looking at FILSS

=Yes. You are the Director of Project Freelancer, are you not?=

"Oh uh, yeah. Of course, that's totally me. I just haven't been around because I've been, doing, you know... Director stuff. Can't really get into it. Secret project."

"Smooth move."

"Shut up, Rock," Roll hissed at the orb.

=How may I assist you today?=

"May we enter the facility?"

=Certainly,= The wall opened in front of them =Please watch your step.=

"Thanks, FILSS," York tilted his helmet to the computer.

"Oh, that reminds me. Could you please change your name to 'Sheila' for Caboose here?" Roll asked, "We've met an AI with your voice and, well, he thinks you're that AI."

=Alright. I will respond to that name as well. You are the Director after all.=

"Thank you, Sheila," Roll bowed, "Also, could you follow any orders Rock gives?"

=As you command.=

"Thank you," Roll bowed before they entered the base.

=Please watch your step. Director, since you have a new visitor with you today, would you like me to run the tutorial program?=

"Yes, always run that. No seriously you need to run that. No it's, really you need to, you need to turn that..."

"Oh my data! Shut the hell up, Caboose!" Rock barked.

"Please run the tutorial program, Sheila," Roll ordered.

"Oh thank the tree," Caboose thanked.

=Hello, and welcome to the Freelancer Off-site Storage Facility. Project Freelancer is a state of the art scientific endeavour, with one goal in mind: to ensure the security of humanity in a harsh and violent Galaxy.=

"Yeah right..." York muttered.

=This bunker has been constructed to guarantee the continued operation of our program, in the event of a primary facility loss. This storage area archives all the components of our Freelancer simulation bases. These outposts test our agents in realistic training scenarios.=

"Yeah, we're on the Blue Team!" Caboose informed.

"Uh, Caboose? Our team was del..." Tucker began.

=I am sorry, I do not recognize that term. Our simulation outposts are categorized into Red, and [entry missing]. Hmm, it seems as though I have a corrupted database. I will correct that when I have more time.=

"Uheh... there's our old stuff! And there's a teleporter! Man, Tucker hates those."

"Dude, more than you'd expect," Tucker admitted.

"Don't interrupt. Come on. This way," Rock ordered as he floated off.

=When the equipment is not being used, it is stored here until it can be repurposed for– Oh. I guess we are moving on.=

"Sorry, Sheila," Roll apologized, "Can you please give me a copy of it to listen to later?"

=Of course,= Sheila confirmed.

Eventually, the group came to a door at the end of a hallway

"Well what's this?" Tucker asked.

=I am sorry, this area is restricted. Only the Director herself may access this entry. I am sure you understand. The nature of our experiments is such that...=

"Please open the door. These soldiers with me have access clearance," Roll informed.

=Are you certain Director? You never bring visitors into this...=

"Sheila, please. They have access," Roll assured.

=Alright. Unlocking.=

"Thank you, Sheila."

=Would you like me to archive your ...personal project?=

"No. Let's see everything, please."

=If you say so Director.=

The group soon went on. Eventually, they entered a large room with multiple robot bodies in it.

"Oh my God! Look at all the yous! You're everywhere, Roll-Church!" Caboose exclaimed in glee, "Why this is like a Best Friend Store, and that is the greatest store ever! You can have your body back! Now which one do you want? I wanna buy one."

"I'm not looking for that," Rock informed as he floated off to a person-sized cryo chamber before it opened, "I'm looking, for this."

"Oh," Caboose blinked under his helmet.

"...Where did Sarge, Simmons, Donut, and Grif go?" Roll asked.

"Theta and Donut wanted to finish listening to the tour," York informed.

"Oh. Okay," Roll nodded.

"Thank you, Sheila," Theta thanked.

=You are quite welcome,= Sheila replied.

"Oh, that was great!" Donut beamed, "So much has been cramped right into me with that."

They turned a corner to see Caboose outside the door.

"Just hold still. No don't go...!" Rock's voice came from the other side.

=I sense things are not going well.=

"Yes please just keep the door shut, thank you that's fine."

=I am sorry, but if the Director requests the door to be opened, I am required to comply.=

"Just keep the door shut."

"Caboose?" Donut pondered.

"Stop! Don't move, don't move, don't..." Roll began.

"MY SPINE!" York screamed behind the door.

"Hrhhh," Washington groaned behind the door.

"Oh! Admiral Buttermilk Biscuit! Oh hello everyone!" Caboose greeted quickly.

"Stop!" Roll yelped.

"Yes. Everyone who wasn't here before is now here now. Hello."

"What're you up to, Blue?" Sarge asked.

"Me? Oh nothing. I'm not hiding anything behind this door."

"Uh, I wouldn't pick that up it looks expensive..." Rock informed.

"Oh tree! Oh tree! Oh tree!" Washington screamed.

"Euh, I think he's lying," Theta noted.

"What was your first clue?" Grif asked.

"Let us see what's in there," Sarge ordered.

"In here? Oh. Nothing is in here. Um, well this probably isn't even a door, either. It's, probably..." Caboose began before the door shook with a bang.

"What th' heck was that?" Sarge asked.

"Oh that was me. Uh, I said this isn't a door, I said it's a gong."

"A gong, what the hell is a–" Grif began to asked before another bang dented the door outwards.

"A gong," Caboose assured before part of the lock got pushed out from the inside thanks to a dent shaped like York was made in the door.

"...Uh oh..." Theta whimpered.

"I'm just going to walk over this way, now, excuse me. Yes, thank you. Pardon me, coming through," Caboose walked right past the Reds and continued walking through the base as the door continued to thump, "Yes excuse me, yes pardon me. Excuse me, yes thank you. Pardon me, coming through. Yes excuse me, yes pardon me."

"Down! Down right now!" Roll ordered behind the door, said door continuing being bent out from behind and shaking.

"Um, Sarge, what's the plan here?" Grif whimpered.

"Men, we have a perfect ambush scenario."

"I agree. Unless wait, are we the ambushers or, the ambushees?" Theta asked.

"Hey, can you ambush something that's trying to beat its way through metal plating to get to you?" Simmons asked.

"Okay, first, we just wait fer th' door to open..." Sarge began before they heard someone release a feminine scream behind the door, "...Was that Washington?"

The door gained a few more dents as it slowly crumbled away. After three more seconds, it then shot off the hinges over top of them.

"Door's open," Grif whimpered, hoping he was wearing a strong enough guard for below the belt.

"What th'– hh?"

Washington groaned as he crawled out of the door until a figure wearing a black Type VI Mjolnir armor stepped on him. The figure currently had York in one hand by his neck. He threw York to the side, who began to inhale deeply for more air. The figure cracked their knuckles and then their neck.

"Okay. So who's first?" Bass asked. (13)

=Alarm, security breach, level Alpha. All personnel report for duty. This is not a drill.=

"Run!" York screamed as he was the first into the storage area.

"Oh crap! Where is he?" Grif freaked as he followed.

"I don't wanna die!" Simmons cried, jumping out of the doorway and down the stairs in one go, Sarge and Lopez following.

"Sheila, we have to help them," Caboose gulped, once more in the control room with Roll.

=Help who?=

"The Reds, Agent Washingtub, and Agent Yolk! Bass-Tex is attacking them, we have to stop him," Caboose informed.

=Stop Agent Texas? Oh no, absolutely not. We should never interfere with an ongoing battlefield simulation test. Our job is to observe and document.=

"Seriously?" Roll asked.

"But he'll kill them," Caboose argued.

=Oh, that would be wonderful! What a successful test.=

"...What in the name of science is wrong with the Director me?!" Roll demanded.

"We need to keep moving, men. Come on, double-time. Hell I'd settle for single-time," Sarge advised as they looked about their surroundings as they continued on.

"Maybe we should just fight. We're all Awake, we've got more abilities than an Unawake guy, and I'm afraid he's gonna start picking us off one by..." Simmons whimpered before a black armored fist shot out of a titanium storage container, grabbing Lopez by the neck, "...one!"

Bass pulled him forward, slamming Lopez's face into the wall, then stepped back and kicked it away, sandwiching Lopez between the wall and a pile of crates. Unfortunately, the impact also caused Lopez's head to be shot clean off.

"Lopez!" Simmons called out.

Quickly, Sarge raised his shotgun and pointed it at Bass, but he darted forward, lifting the gun up just before Sarge fired, then punched the Red in the stomach and flung him towards Grif. Grif yelped, rolling out of the way...only to have Lopez's head to slam him in the crotch. Sarge stumbled forward as he was thrown and his helmet rammed right into York's crotch, causing him to scream in pain. Suddenly, Bass barreled straight into all three of them, crashing through a crate before flinging them into a pile of barrels, sending them scattering across the floor.

"Oh man, forget this. I need to get a bigger weapon," Simmons gulped, "Caboose, help us!"

"How? The computer won't let me. She's mean! This place is filled with mean ladies," Caboose argued.

"Caboose," Roll frowned.

"...Except for Roll-Church. She is my friend," Caboose informed, "I would say she is a nice lady, but there are no such thing as nice ladies."

"Push some buttons, I don't know!" Simmons called.

"Buttons!? Oh man, I love buttons!" Caboose cheered as he began pressing buttons, "Beep bup bup boop beep bup boop."

"I don't think that's going to..." Roll began before a crate of large weapons tipped over and dropped them next to Simmons, "0.o ...Nevermind." (14)

"Wow. That actually worked perfectly," Simmons chuckled as he picked up one of the bazooka and put the rest into his Pocket, "Thanks!"

"Great! How the heck did I do that?" Caboose asked as Simmons ran off.

"I think the question is *why* the heck did you have to do that?" Roll asked, "And are you seriously recording this, Delta?"

"For future reference on what you'll expect in this Loop for other Loopers," Delta assured.

"Ow!" Grif screamed, "The cup doesn't work! The cup *doesn't work* !"

"Hey Simmons, what the hell is going on in there?" Tucker asked, "Aside from you guys getting assaulted by Bass."

"He's even scarier than Tex when she's not Awake!" Simmons whimpered, "And he's not Awake, either!"

"Seriously? Well, why not use the Force or something you guys get to do?" Tucker asked.

"Just come and help me."

"Ah. I get it now, he's going too fast for you guys to reach into your Pockets," Tucker smirked, "Lucky for me..."

In the storeroom, as Sarge, Washington, York, and Grif staggered to their feet, Bass kicked a barrel towards them. Grif quickly ducked down and let the barrel hit Sarge as Washington and York jumped over it before getting up and firing his battle rifle, but Bass rolled forward to avoid the bullets. He grabbed Washington and York by their fist and foot respectively before throwing them at Grif, the orange getting nailed in the nuts once more. Bass then grabbed Grif and Sarge by their throats and smashed their heads together before knocking Sarge away with some punches and kicks. Grif opened fire again only for Bass to knock his rifle away and begin pounding on him with some powerful punches before knocking him to the floor, holding onto his right leg with one hand then raising his other in a fist.

"Wait wait wait-!"

Bass struck Grif really, really hard in the groin, then kicked him across the room, right into a crate. As he struggled to get up, a teleporter fell on him and he flew out the other end just as Bass knocked Sarge aside.

"O-ho o-ho," Grif groaned, "Why me?"

"Guess you're just a pain magnet down there," York noted before he finally managed to get into his Pocket and pulled out the Keyblades Oblivion and Oathkeeper, "Oh yeah. Time to go for it! Thunder!"

Bass looked up before jumping to the side, dodging the lightning bolts trying to hit him. Bass skidded to a halt beside one of the containers and grabbed it with one arm. Grif and York yelped as

Bass threw it right at them with ease. A blur shot by and the container was sliced down the middle, dodging them both.

"Hey, Bat Head!" Tucker called as he leveled his gaze at Bass, "Remember me? Step away from the idiots!"

Bass slowly approached Tucker and the two stood off. Simmons was seen mounting himself atop a crate from afar.

"Oh God, please don't let him see me," Simmons whimpered, pulling out the BFG9000 from his Pocket.

Bass charged at Tucker, who quickly slid under the black-wearing fighter. He spun around, but Bass jumped over the sweep kick. Bass and Tucker jumped back when a crate fell between them.

"Yes! I saved Tucker! Oh wait..." Caboose slumped, "I saved Tucker."

"Caboose, what're you doing?" Tucker demanded before the crate was torn in two by Bass, "Ulp. Simmons, now!"

Bass turned to see Simmons had finished charging the BFG-9000, "You ratted me out, you son of a bitch!"

Simmons fired the energy shot out, but Bass jumped aside. Using the momentum generated by the explosion, he was able to grab a teleporter and fling it towards him.

"Oh shit! Not again!" Simmons yelped.

Simmons fired another energy blast, but it simply went through the teleporter and out the exit that was right next to the pile he was standing on.

"Oh shit!"

Simmons was thrown into the air by the explosion, right into the flying teleporter and out of the other end – straight into Bass who

grabbed him and performed a German Suplex on him. He then kicked him into Tucker, sending them sprawling to the ground.

"Um, can we use turrets on him or, some explodey fiery thing?" Caboose asked, Roll unsure about either covering her eyes or just getting some popcorn.

=That would be outside the bounds of my standard safety protocols. I cannot do that.=

"Please, Sheila?"

=I am sorry, Director, but you added the order that I should not listen to you should it be Agent Texas that is fighting.=

"I hate my other half," Roll scowled.

"What do we do, Sarge?" Grif asked, holding an orange cone.

"Ah don't know," Sarge replied, "We've been tryin' t' git into our Pockets, but he's been stoppin' us even if he don't know what we're tryin' t' do," Sarge noted.

"And when I was able to get these guys out, he was able to avoid the Thunder Spell," York added, showing his Keyblades, "I've tried Stop, Aero, Freeze, and even Fire, but he's able to actually avoid them all."

"Just like the last time we had to do this when it was just me and you Awake, York," Tucker noted, "Except it was against Tex and, ugh, I hated that Loop so much."

"He's charging!" Grif shouted.

Bass, in his charge, snatched Sarge's shotgun out of his grip, punched Tucker, York, and Washington aside, and kicked Simmons into another teleporter.

"WHAT THE FUUUUUUUUUUUU..." Simmons yelped as he flew through a few teleporters, "...UUCK!"

As Bass turned towards Grif, Simmons flew out the exit from the previous teleporter and into another teleporter. He exited the teleporter and knocked right into Washington, knocking him straight into Grif, who ended up kicked in the groin once again. Bass slammed Grif and Washington onto the floor with his foot and pointed the shotgun right at Grif's head.

"Oh no, Grif! Washington!" Simmons freaked.

"Yipe!" Grif squeaked as Bass pulled the trigger...only for the gun to be out of ammo.

"Private Grif, you should be ashamed of yourself. We've run out of ammo again! That's your responsibility!" Sarge scolded.

"Huh. I guess this is the first time my laziness has ever saved my..." Grif began before Bass picked up Washington and swung him back like a golf club, "Protect me cone!"

"Ouch!" Roll winched as she watched Grif, screaming, sent flying over a crate, Washington soon joining him, screaming while holding his own groin, "Wow. Washington is *not* having a good Loop, is he?"

"This is the first time he's actually had to fight here," Delta informed.

"Watch it!" York barked as he pushed the two off him.

"You watch it," Washington groaned, "Grif, I am not going to mock you about this anymore this Loop."

"You idiots, let me show you how it's done," Sarge scolded, managing to get into his Pocket and pulled out two shotguns, "Meet Rosemary and Amber!"

He proceeded to start open firing on Bass. The black-armored robot began to dodge the shots just as fast as Sarge was releasing them. He reached Sarge and punched him in the face, sending the

shotguns into the air. Bass caught them and used them as a pair of clubs to send Sarge into Simmons and Grif.

"Nice demonstration Sarge," Grif grunted.

"Ah shut up."

"Hey guys, look up there," York pointed at the giant crate looming over Bass.

"That again? No way," Tucker replied, "That never works."

Bass looked up at the crate and jumped up to it. He tore the crane holding it in two, letting it drop down. Jumping behind it, he proceeded to lift it up and threw it at them.

"See?!" Tucker yelped, "Hold on, guys!"

Tucker quickly activated his sword and sliced the crate in two. Medi-Packs rained down on the group, covering everyone but York and Tucker. The two charged at Bass, blades at the ready.

=Agent Texas is a bit of a badass. However, it seems that the blue one is also a badass,= Sheila noted.

"Yeah. Aside from York and Washington, he seems to have the most combat experience of everyone here," Roll agreed.

"Oh thank God, thought I was a goner this Loop. Sarge, where are you?" Simmons called before Sarge popped up out of a pile of medpacks, Lopez's head on his head.

"Rrr, what happened? I feel defeated, yet inexplicably rejuvenated," Sarge noted.

"En serio, ¿por qué coño Yo siempre terminan como una cabeza en cada maldito bucle entro como un robot o esqueleto (Seriously, why the fuck do I always end up as just a head in every single fucking loop I go into as a robot or skeleton)?!" Lopez ranted.

Tucker and York worked in tandem, slashing and swiping at Bass. The robot dodged each and every single slash. The two tried to stab, but Bass caught their arms, twisted them, and kicked them away. Their swords went into the air before stabbing into the ground, Tucker's sword turning off just seconds after.

"Oh come on," York grunted as he and Tucker got up.

"O-aow, bullshit!" Tucker shook a fist before hearing something creak above them, "Uh...York?"

"Hm?"

York turned to Tucker, who pointed up. York looked up just in time for the teleporter to fall and landed on them. the two exited out of one behind Bass, who performed a back spin kick at them. York's visor shattered before his helmet broke apart, revealing his brown hair and his milky-white eye with a scar. Roll gasped as she saw the eye.

"He...He's partially blind?" Roll asked as Washington charged at Bass.

"Indeed. During the first simulation battle he had with Maine and Wyoming against him, Agent Te...Bass used his gun to protect York from some grenades that Maine had tossed into the field," Delta informed, *"Unfortunately, his eye was left uncovered."*

"Simmons, do you got heat seeking?" Sarge asked.

"Yeah," Simmons replied, "Missile, rocket, cannonball, or coconut?"

"Coconut?" Grif repeated.

"Don't ask, but you'll connect it to the reason why I liked wearing that tie for those twenty Loops with you," Simmons informed. (15)

"I didn't know that was there!" York yelped.

"No, no, no, no! That doesn't bend that way!" Tucker yelped before Washington let out a feminine scream.

"Now lock on and let her rip!" Sarge ordered before Bass shot out of a teleporter near Roll and Caboose.

"...bitch! Damn it I hate this black stuff, what the hell is it?" Tucker's voice came from Bass.

"Tucker?" Roll blinked.

"Oh, hey Roll, Caboose," Tucker greeted, "Look, I got my sword back."

"There he is!"

"Huh?" Tucker turned, "Aw shit."

"Get him!" Sarge roared as he and Grif tackled Tucker.

"Ow, come on! I'm not Bass, I'm a Blue! I'm not the one you're fighting. Leave me the fuck alone!" Tucker shouted between the pummels until Grif and Sarge tensed and collapsed, holding their groins.

"That's enough, you two," Roll frowned as she put her broom away.

"Man, you guys are nuts," Tucker groaned before Bass's hand shot out of a teleporter and grabbed him by the neck, "Nuts!"

Tucker was pulled through it. Tucker was then suplexed by him. Bass went for the mount and started punching him.

"O-ho, wow, right into the mount, huh? O-hoa, not even gonna buy dinner? Come on, I like your style, but I'm do-own-n't swing that way!"

Simmons began to position himself to fire at Bass.

"Simmons, what're you waiting for?" York demanded.

"They look the same, which one do I shoot?"

"Shoot the one who's winning dumbass!" Washington argued.

"Ow," Grif, cradling his injured area, staggered into the line of fire.

"Grif! Watch it!" Simmons barked.

"Uh-huh-huh."

Bass kicked Tucker forward, knocking him into Grif before grabbing his leg, pulling him back and punching him to the ground so hard that the black ash flew off his armor, even cracking random areas of Tucker's armor, as he skidded back towards Sarge, York, Washington, and Simmons.

"Ahoww, ow," Tucker groaned, a bit of his black dreadlocks showing under his helmet.

"Wow, knocked the black right off ya," Sarge noted.

"That's racist," Tucker and Roll noted.

"You're all clear Simmons, now shoot him!" York ordered.

"This will not go well," Delta stated as Theta and himself made a backup of themselves.

"Fire in the hole!" Simmons called as he pulled the trigger.

Simmons fired a missile at Bass, who took off and leapt into a teleporter, flipping out the other side and then running straight towards Tucker, Washington, York, and the Reds; the missile still on his tail.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Washington demanded.

"Run!" York screamed.

Tucker bumped into Sarge and Simmons as York knocked into Grif. Bass ran up and knocked all five of them down with a single lariat before sliding right under Washington's legs. Washington looked up and spotted the missile moving right towards him.

"Oh God, not my ba..." Wash began before it went between his legs, "Oh thank God. I thought I was..." he turned around, just as Bass leapt into a second teleporter on the floor and the missile flew past him and towards a pile of propane tanks, "FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCKED!"

As the missile hit, the tanks ignited and jetted towards them like mini-rockets. Grif was sent flying by a tank that hit him square in the groin while the others were knocked into the air by the tanks' explosions. Meanwhile, Bass rolled out the other side of the teleporter and watched as Tucker, Sarge, York, and Washington and Simmons came crashing down to the ground. Bass then approached a cement barricade and carefully pushed it aside and soon pushed it a few more inches. He then waited as Grif finally came crashing down on top of it...crotch-first.

"Ooaaah! Why won't you just kill me?" Grif groaned as she slid off the barrier and onto the floor. (16)

"Hey Bass!" Rock's sphere hit Bass on the head, making him turn to see Rock standing, his buster out and ready, "How 'bout you pick on somebody your own size?"

=Five seconds later=

"Ow. Ow! Ooow! Stop it! Bass, you are embarrassing me," Rock grunted with each swing of his former sphere body to his face by Bass, who had Rock in a hold, "Ow! Stop! Ah! Hey, are you gonna sit a–ow–you gonna help me or not? Stop it."

"Naw buddy. Ah think you got everything under control. We'll just hang back here," Sarge chuckled.

"Won't it stop?!" Rock barked, earning another hit from his former sphere body held by Bass.

"Yeah, you've got some catching up to do," Grif noted, he and Washington holding packs of ice below the belt.

"The whole–stop."

"Hey, what's he beating him with?" York asked.

"I think that was his old body," Theta noted.

"You mean he ain't a floatin' cue ball any more?" Sarge asked, "That's too bad. Had a few more nicknames in my side pocket. We'll certainly miss you Lord Hackensack of the Roundalots."

"Beating him with his own body? That doesn't seem physically possible," Washington noted.

"Alright. I'm good now," Bass chuckled, dropping both Rock and the sphere, "Man...What was way to get used to a body when Waking Up."

"Son of a...You've been Awake this whole time?!" Grif demanded.

"I've been Awake for about just before tearing the door down with New York and Washington," Bass replied, "Now someone explain to me why I'm in this sweet Type-VI Mjolnir Armor and why does it feel stronger?"

"Welcome to the Red VS Blue Loop, Bass," Roll greeted.

"Roll? Wow. Not bad for ya," Bass noted, "So why are you in the armor like I am and Rock's in his normal get up?"

"Hey, screw you," Rock snorted.

"...Is he okay?" Bass whispered.

"He's been having...issues...with this Loop," Roll explained, "Sheila, do you have any way of scanning for certain armors?"

=Yes, Director,= Sheila replied.

"Search for Agent Maine's armor," Roll ordered.

"Director?" Bass repeated.

"It's a long story, so get comfy. It's twenty hours long and I only like telling it in five minute intervals," Roll replied with a sigh.

"And there you go. All nice and recovered," Doc beamed.

"Then why do my balls still feel like they've been slammed into concrete?" Grif asked.

"Oh, I owed Bass a favor and he cashed it in to not have me heal you down there. Something about a Valentine's Day and the theft of all the heart-shaped Oreos that Loop," Doc informed.

"So let me get this straight; as long as we're in here, the Recovery Beacon in all our armors won't activate?" Rock asked.

=Correct, AI Fragment Epsilon,= Sheila responded =As long as you are in this facility, your Recovery Beacon will not activate.=

"Okay. Good," Rock nodded.

"Seriously? This happens to you every single Loop here?" Bass asked in disbelief.

"Si," Lopez replied as Roll reattached his head to his body.

"How do you handle it?" Bass asked.

"Me voy a la terapia cuando soy capaz de ... y el terapeuta es un Looper. Cuando hice el error la primera vez, terminé en el manicomio."

"Ouch. The insane asylum?" Roll winced.

"Si," Lopez replied as Roll finished attaching his head before he taped his neck twice, "Still, that was a bit of a nice vacation. I didn't have to deal with anyone from my Baseline."

"Holy...!" Bass gawked.

"He's managed to figure out how to talk in different languages," Roll explained, "He even knows a few...strange...languages."

"...Strange? Strange how?" Bass asked.

"I speak oxygen," Lopez informed. (17)

"...Oh," Bass sweatdropped.

=The files are ready, Director,= Sheila informed.

"Cool. Thanks, Sheila," Roll nodded.

"Files?"

"I want to figure out what the heck the real Director was doing," Roll informed as the three walked over to a computer beside Rock, "...What is with all of this? Win/Loss records? Psyche Profiles?!"

"...Washington used to wet the bed?" Rock read.

"...Oh, that's hilarious," Bass snickered.

"So, no new info? Wild goose chase again?" Rock asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. Look at this picture, do you have any idea what this is?" Bass asked, pointing at an image.

"What is that, ice? Oh yeah. I know that place," Rock replied, "That's a uh, secure location like um, like a safe house. Wait, how do I know that?"

"You know it because it's a Freelancer base. And it's not far from here," Bass replied.

"If you already know what it is, why the hell are ya asking me?" Rock demanded.

"Because, I'm not interested in what *I* know, I'm interested in what *you* know," Bass replied.

"What is that, fucking wisdom? Listen; next time you wanna ask me a God damn question just ask it, don't beat around the bush."

"Whoa! Where's the colorful language coming from?" Bass asked.

"He's been having a bad Loop," Roll and Lopez replied.

"I'm gonna go see what weapons they have stored here," Bass informed before he walked off.

"Okay. Need any help?" Roll asked.

=Director.=

"Yes, Sheila?"

=Before you leave, would you like to make a journal entry? It has been quite a while since your last update.=

"Journal?" Rock and Roll repeated.

=Yes. I know you are busy, but you always ask me to remind you when you are falling behind on documentation. Documentation is an important part of any scientific endeavor.=

"Right, um... hey why don't you play one of the entries for me," Roll ordered.

=Certainly,= Sheila replied before Director Roll's voice came from the computer, an image of her with sunglasses on on the screen =The Counselor's insistence on referring to Agent Texas as a 'byproduct' continues to frustrate me. We have seen our share of unharvestable fragments. He is certainly not one of them. No indeed, he's something else entirely.=

"Whoa. Okay, I don't want to add any new entries this time, Sheila. I'll...uh...I'll go see the others now," Roll informed before leaving with Lopez.

"..." Rock turned to the computer and spoke in Roll's voice, "Sheila, I want you to transfer all these files to Epsilon."

=Understood. Transferring now.=

"And do me a favor: delete the rest."

=Deleting entries.=

"So what are you guys doing?" Roll asked as she noticed Simmons had placed the last of the teleporters in a neat little row.

"Well, since we all stored everything in here at least once, we thought you might like to have all of this with you," Simmons informed.

"R-Really?" Roll asked.

"Eeyup," Sarge replied, "'Course, yer boyfriend Bass done absconded with a lot of th' weapons."

"He did?" Roll asked.

"Yeah," Grif replied, "Said he needed them for something."

"Still, you've got all of this," Tucker motioned to the rest of the stuff in the area, "I'm sure you'll find something good for all this."

"I'm leaving, Rock," Rock turned to see Bass approach.

"What? Where?"

"Can't say, there's some things I need to look into."

"You're going to that frozen base, aren't you?"

"I need to know more about myself this Loop, Rock. And I'm not gonna find anything out by sitting around on my ass with all of you."

"Fine. Then I'm coming, too," Rock informed.

"And that's the last of it," Roll noted as she put the last medi-kit into her Pocket, "I still can't believe there was a couch in here."

"Yeah. Sure surprised us first time around, too," Grif agreed, "Sarge had a breakdown after finding out our military career was just a big lie."

"Uh, guys? I can't find Rock anywhere," Tucker informed.

"And I cannot find the bathroom!" Caboose shouted on the other side of the now-empty room.

"Down the hall and to the left, Caboose!" Roll replied, "But seriously? Sheila, where're Rock and Bass?"

=They left an hour ago using a Puma.=

"Oh don't start that up again!" Grif shouted.

"...Oh no," Washington realized, "Bass is going to lure the Meta to him using Rock!"

"Wh-What?!" Roll exclaimed.

"Quick! To the plane!" York ordered.

"There's a plane in here?!" Roll demanded.

"Grif will operate the vehicle and I will assist," Delta informed.

"Come on! We've got two guys out there about to get it down against a monster!" Washington ordered.

"Sheila, go into sleep mode until I get back," Roll ordered, "If someone says they're from the UNSC, they have full clearance to anything in the facility."

=Affirmative, Director,= Sheila replied. =ALARM! AI Fragment Epsilon has just activated his recovery beacon!=

"Okay. We're approaching the place," Grif informed.

"Whoa. Place looks *worse* than it normally does," Tucker noted, "And normally, you're working *with* the Meta, Wash."

"What?!" Roll exclaimed.

"Hey, hey, hey. That's because I sometimes don't Awake until *after* Meta betrays me," Washington informed, "But you're right, the damage is much worse."

"...Aw shit," Grif facepalmed, "I forgot I had added some stuff to my armor."

"The armor you lost from the emp?" Simmons asked.

"Yeah. It was all emp-proofed by Twilight Sparkle, too," Grif informed.

"So you made the Meta, the freaking monster of your Loops, *even more powerful* ?!" Roll demanded.

"Sorry."

"Private Grif, you are hereby getting a shotgun court-martial after this!" Sarge demanded.

"What the fuck?! Wh-What the hell is with this guy's armor?!" Bass demanded, firing a charged shot at the Meta only for it to be absorbed.

"How should I know?" Rock groaned, his stomach blasted through to expose his wiring, "Fuckin' can't believe you shot me, you cock-bite."

"...Is it bad that we're both so casual with the swearing this Loop?" Bass asked, earning a bird from Rock as a reply, (18) "Ah. Fair eno– Where the hell is that music coming from?"

The Meta was about to fire when he looked up, hearing Tejano music playing. Flying right at them was the ship the others were in.

"There they are! Land right next to them!" York ordered.

"Right... *land* ..."

"You do know how to land this vehicle, don't you?" York asked.

"Sure, that just means stop flying, right?" Grif asked.

"Brace for impact!" Sarge and Theta called out.

"Oh shit! This is gonna suck!"

"Dammit, Grif! You were supposed to learn how to land one of these things!" Washington snapped, "D, don't you *dare* back yourself up!"

"Oh noooooo~!" Donut screamed girlishly.

"At least I got my Medi-Gun," Doc noted.

"...I still haven't got my peanuts," Caboose stated.

The Pelican quickly dropped towards the surface and crashed. Meta jumped out of the way to avoid it. The Pelican finally came to a stop, with the Reds, Blues, Freelancers, and Roll pressed against the glass, crushing a cowering Doc under them.

"I would say that was the cavalry, but I've never seen a line of horses crash into the battlefield from outer space before," Bass noted as he and Rock poked out from behind a tree.

"Heeyy... Is it possible for a Looper that was originally a super-advanced robot that is now a memory fragment out of an artificial intelligence program enclosed inside a robotic body to piss its pants? Because I'm pretty sure I just did that," Rock admitted.

"Shut up, Rock," Bass snorted as he walked over to the ship, "Come on, let's go see how many of your friends survived that."

"You know, they're not really my friends."

"That's okay, I'm sure none of them really survived aside from Roll."

"Grif! Look what you did to our ship!" Sarge scolded as they got out of it.

"Aw fuck it, it's a rental."

"Good point. Fuck it," Sarge nodded before he kicked the Pelican off the cliff and let it fall over the side into the icy water below as the other two ran over.

"Rock! Bass!" Roll beamed before slamming the two of them into the ground with a single strike of her broom, "YOU BASTARDS! WHY DID YOU EVEN THINK OF DOING THIS?!"

"Well, excuse me!" Rock snapped, "But I'm sick and tired of being around idiots like...like them!"

"I just want answers for who I am this Loop," Bass shrugged before a growl earned their attention, "Dammit, I was hoping you crushed him under that."

Before anyone could do anything, Bass's helmet-covered face blew forward, a spike coming out of him.

"B-Bass!" Roll gasped as the Meta kicked Bass's body off the spike and attached it to his back, cloaking.

"What just happened?!" Rock yelped.

"I'm sorry, you two. The Meta captured him inside of a memory unit," Washington informed, "And I think that armor has Clock-Up now from the Kabuto Loop."

"Grif, why did you even have something with Clock Up on your armor?!" Simmons demanded.

"So I could steal as many oreos in the world in any Loop and not get caught," Grif replied, "The cloaking was so that no one could see me with Clock Up if they slowed the videos down. Let's see, uh...Oh! I also added super strength, a Kryptonite sword, solar charging, MP3, PSP, 3DS, internet, karaoke, YouTube, and, uh, Netflix."

Washington facepalmed with a sigh, "Look, the only way we're going to get Bass back is if Rock here goes get him from the containment unit. But you need to hurry. If it locks down before I can open it, he'll be trapped in there."

"Ugh," Rock facepalmed, "This Loop just keeps getting worse and worse."

"Split up," York ordered as he took out his Keyblades, "Everyone make sure you've got your best weapon from the Loops ready."

Tucker pulled out his sword as Simmons took out a pair of shoulder-mounted missile-launchers. Caboose took out a plush of someone in

Type-VI Mjolnir armor colored in cobalt while Sarge took out a pair of shotguns tied together into nunchucks. Donut just whimpered as he took out a stick.

"A wand?" Rock asked, "A fucking wand?!"

"I...I haven't really had a lot of Loops so far," Donut admitted, "I haven't really been to anyplace with really strong things."

"...Hold on. I have an idea," Roll noted before taking out a pink mustache from her Pocket, "Donut, this is...the Warfstache."

"Warfstache?" Donut repeated.

"It holds divine power within its follicles. When you wear it, you will get incredible power and become capable of unleashing all your pent-up emotions into raw, undiluted power," Roll informed, "But just be careful because you'll want to call yourself 'Wilfred Warfstache' when you do wear it." (19)

"R-Really? Well...I always did want to be named Wilfred," Donut noted as he was given the mustache, "Thanks, Roll."

"...Are you serious?" Washington asked as everyone went off in different directions, leaving just Washington, Roll, and Rock.

"It's a placebo," Roll informed, "Before I woke up in a Hub Loop, the Unawake me of there was a big fan of this Markiplier guy. She made a lot of those pink mustaches."

"Wow. Okay," Washington nodded, "This is the first time I've seen the Meta not be able to get someone who was replacing Tex before the Pelican crashed. You and Bass must have been doing well."

"He shot me," Rock frowned, pointing at the hole in him.

"...We'll get Doc on that," Washington informed.

"So where is the Meta?" Rock asked.

"Well, normally, after Epsilon took the data from the base we were in, we'd talk about Tex..." Washington looked at Rock.

"...It's kinda easy when you've got her memories," Rock admitted in Roll's voice, making his sister gawk at him.

"Yeah. Should've figured that one out," Washington facepalmed.

"We found some journals from the Director. Bass is someone from her life. Someone she loved..."

"Forte. In this Loop, the guy Bass is based on was named 'Forte.'"

"Forte...When they made Alpha, he came back. He was a byproduct of the process," Roll informed.

"He's just a shadow."

"Don't call him that! He died in his real life this Loop, and that's all the Director ever remembered of him," Rock scowled, "So now, no matter how tough our Bass is, no matter how hard he's going to fight this Loop, he's always going to fail! Because that's what he's based on this Loop. No matter what he's doing, or what he's trying to accomplish, just when his goal is within reach, it gets yanked away. Every. Single. Time. Can you imagine what that's like?"

"I think I'm getting the idea..." Washington noted, seeing the Meta appear behind Roll and Rock.

"Uh oh..." the two gulped as the Meta growled loudly.

"All! My! RAGE!" the four turned to see Donut charging, wearing the pink mustache, "I'M SO ANGRY! I'M GONNA KILL YOU, GOD-DAMMIT!" Donut roared as he elbow-dropped the Meta, "YAAAA!" Rock covered Roll's eyes as Roll covered Rock's eyes, "YOU SON OF A BITCH!" Washington's helmet turned green as the other soon ran up, " *YOU SON OF A BITCH!* "

"What the...?" Grif blinked a few times in shock.

"What the hell did Donut have?" Tucker gawked.

"That...That's kinda overkill," Simmons gulped.

"Yikes, Donut. Don't you think that was a little...overkill?" York asked as the Meta's blood and gore-splattered helmet was quickly Pocketed by Grif.

"Who is this 'Donut' you all are talking about? *I* am Wilfred Warfstache," Donut informed, twirling his pink mustache on his helmet while holding the storage unit that had Bass in it.

"Uh...Okay, um...Wilfred. Could we please have the device you're holding?" Roll asked, *'I...I can't believe that worked.'*

"But of course," Donut replied, handing it over to Roll...who quickly took his mustache as well, "Huh? What happened? All I remember is putting the Warfstache on and then nothing."

"...Donut, please be careful with this," Roll advised, handing the Warfstache back to him, "Look, I'll go in here and..."

"Too late!" Rock called as he jumped into it.

"Rock?!" Roll gasped before dropping the now-sparking containment unit, "Ah!"

"Dammit, Rock!" Washington growled.

"Lopez, stabilize that unit right now!" Sarge ordered.

"Yo no puedo hacer nada. Se está empezando a cerrar (I cannot do anything. It is starting to shut down)," Lopez informed.

"Oh no!" Simmons gasped.

"What? What?" Caboose asked.

"It's only going to be open for a few more seconds. After that, he'll be trapped," Simmons informed.

"Come on, Rock-Church. You can do it. Can you hear me? You can... Run towards my voice!" Caboose called.

"Caboose, I...I don't think that'll work," Roll sniffled.

"It's shutting down! I can't stop it!"

"Lopez, fix it!"

"No puedo, estupido."

"Rock-Church? Are you there?"

The containment unit slowly faded, and then shut down.

"Roll...Caboose... I'm sorry," Simmons apologized.

"Church?" Caboose asked as Washington let Roll start crying on him.

"And where the hell did the Pelican in the water come from?" a UNSC interrogator demanded the Reds.

"Hmm... I don't know. I guess the Meta must have hijacked it, and crashed it here. That makes sense, right?" Grif asked.

"Man, the Chairman is going to be pissed. The budget only allows for one crashed Pelican per mission. All right, well I guess you guys check out. You can head back to your training base now."

"We just call them bases," Sarge frowned.

"Hmph. I bet," the interrogator snorted.

"Hey. We solved your problem. Not bad for 'Trainees,'" Grif pointed out.

"I gotta hand it to you. Killing one of these agents would be tough. But three? And this guy..." the man motioned to what looked like York's armor, "The Chairman will not be happy he's dead. I think he wanted to debrief him personally. Oh well."

"Yeah..." Simmons noted.

"Yeah, that's too bad," Sarge agreed.

"Well, be sure to let him know we're sorry," Grif added.

"Whatever. You're free to go. If we need you, we know where to find you," the Interrogator informed before he walked away.

"Come on, fellas. Let's go home," Sarge ordered.

"Uh... The jeep's busted, Sarge. Are we walking?" Grif asked.

"That depends. You fellas gotten over your fear of flying yet?" Sarge asked.

"Yes sir," Simmons saluted before they stole a Hornet and flew off.

"Yoink!" Grif called.

"Hey! You can't take that! That... That's UNSC property! Get back here! Hey, come on, I'll lose my job!"

"I hope this doesn't go on our permanent record!" Simmons noted.

"It hasn't so far," Sarge shrugged before pulling out Washington and Roll from his Pocket...along with the containment unit, "And we got th' containment unit, too."

"So what's this one called?" Roll asked, hugging the containment unit.

"The Hornet," Washington informed as Simmons pulled out York in a spare of his armor, Caboose, and Tucker.

"Looks more like a Wasp to me," Roll noted.

"No, it's a fuckin' Hornet," Grif informed.

"Ah don't know. Ah like th' name Wasp."

"You sure you're up for this?" Washington asked.

"I...I'll be fine," Roll assured, "Besides...We can try to get them out, right?"

Washington nodded before turning to the argument that bloomed because of Roll, "Dammit, guys! I told you it's called a Hornet because of the shape of this thing!"

"Damn it. This is one tough containment unit," York noted, standing up and moving away from the containment unit that had Bass and Rock in it as Lopez and Washington slumped in their seats.

"Tell me about it. The few times I end up switching places with Simmons and this has always been the pain in the ass for me," Lopez sighed.

"You've switched places with Simmons before?"

"Remember that one Loop where Simmons dropkicked Wyoming in the balls and then shot him in the face? That was me."

"Huh. Cool," Washington nodded.

"While we have been able to power it up, we still have yet been able to access into its mainframe," Delta noted, *"However, at our current progress, we'll be ready by the time Carolina appears."*

"She still isn't awake either," Theta added, *"I keep sending out a ping for her, but I don't get anything from her."*

"Oh yeah. This will be the first time you've ever seen Carolina not Awake when you're with us, won't it?" Washington asked York.

"Yeah. I...I'm not sure what to feel about it," York admitted.

"Just...Just be careful okay?" Washington offered, "She...She's not the Carolina we knew back then, not anymore."

York nodded, "Speaking of girls in blue, how's Roll doing?"

"...I caught her drinking the strong stuff again," Washington informed.

"Ouch," York winced.

"Right now, I left Tucker and Caboose to watch her," Washington informed before a small silence went by, "And now I realize how dumb that sounded and planned."

"Dammit, Caboose! How did you get stuck up there?!" Tucker demanded, looking up at the top of the base.

"I don't know! But it is awesome up here! Tucker, you should get Roll-Chuch up here!" Caboose called, his voice echoing, "Oh! It's an echo place!"

"...Well, that should distract Caboose for a bit," Tucker noted as he entered the base...and sighed, "Dammit, Roll."

"Hey~ Tucky~!" Roll giggled, her cheeks pink, as she stumbled over to him in just random bits of her armor and her bodysuit.

"You're drunk," Tucker frowned under his helmet.

"And you're sexy," Roll giggled at her strange comeback.

"Dang it, Roll. Ever since we got back, you've just been drinking," Tucker sighed.

"But if I don'ts, I'll gets all remember-urp!-rememberblems," Roll informed, sluggishly and dizzily trying to get over to him, "Thish ish likes when Wily done...um...he...what did he do? Oh yeah! When he did that meanie thing to Rock and I wanted to rip him aparts into little teensy, weensie pieces...Shtupid crashy-washy..." (20)

Tucker frowned under his helmet before pulling Roll into a hug.

"Hey! Wh-What's with you?" Roll demanded.

"Roll, you're a member of the Reds and Blues now," Tucker informed, "It started the moment Caboose saw you as 'Church.' Between you and me, I think he knows you're not really Church, but then again...he is Caboose." he looked down at her, "The point is, we're all one big family. Sure, we may fight and shoot at each other at times, but in the end...we're still family. Sure, there's a lot of shit that goes on here and in the Loops we go into, but we're still a family. And family looks after each other, like right now. You're family now, Roll. Even if you don't think of us like it, everyone here sees you as that little sister we all were hoping for. And, right now, York, Delta, Lopez, and Washington are working around the clock, trying to get back two of the people you cherish; your real brother Rock and your buddy Bass. And yet, you're here, trying to drink your sorrows away. Well, I can't stand it anymore, seeing someone that I now see as a little sister just wasting her Loop away! So we're going to throw the bottle you've got away, get sober, get you in your armor, and you're going to do the one thing everyone here does no matter what; remember. Because to us here in the Red VS Blue Loops, Memory is the Key."

"..." Roll sniffled before dropping the bottle and started hitting Tucker's torso, "It...It's not fair! Wh-Why...? Why is it that while...while I've been both annoyed, ticked off, but also love being in this Loop, Rock and Bass...They...Why do they have to have such terrible times here?! B-Bass is doomed to fail everything in this Loop while

Rock...Rock is getting my memories because he's the Epsilon for this Loop and..." she took in a deep breath, "...and he just abandoned me. I told him I'd go into it to get back Bass and...and he just did it himself."

"As much as I'd like to say what he was thinking, I can't," Tucker shook his head, "None of us ever pry into what Epsilon or Church does while they go in there since it's...well..it's personal for them both. All I do know is that Rock is going to be pissed at us for pulling him out of there like the first times Epsilon and Church were pulled out of those things." he patted her head, "Plus...there's one important thing he didn't do; he never said 'goodbye.'"

"G...Goodbye? What does saying 'goodbye' have to do with anything?!"

"It's an unspoken rule around here. Don't say goodbye."

"Why not?"

"It's something Carolina's mom used to tell her," Tucker informed, "She always told her 'Never say goodbye. If you don't say 'goodbye,' then...you aren't really gone. ...You...just aren't here right now.'"

"...Her mother sounds like a smart woman."

"That she was, Roll, that she was," Tucker nodded, "Now, come on. Get your armor all the way on. Caboose got stuck on the roof."

"Seriously? How'd he do that?" Roll asked, giggling a bit.

"We have no idea," Tucker chuckled.

"...Tucker?"

"Yeah?" the aquamarine/teal/whatever Trooper turned back to her, only to end up getting a hug.

"Thanks. I...I needed this," Roll thanked before running off.

"..." Tucker chuckled as he shook his head, "Guess I should try to not tell her that Tex is Carolina's ghost mom now." A gunshot went off, followed by Donut and Doc screaming like little girls, "...And the moment's gone just like that."

"You okay, York?" Washington asked as he and York were working on the containment unit.

"I...She's really bad right now, huh?" York questioned, "No wonder she doesn't like to talk about how she first met you guys after you became a Blue."

"And you decided to be a Red with North," Washington noted.

"Hey, trying to keep it even is all," York held his hands up.

"Gentlemen, the unit's working now," Delta informed, *"We can extract Rock Light and Bass from the unit now."*

"Okay," Washington nodded, "I'll get everyone. You two work on extracting."

"Ugh...That was not *fun,"* Bass groaned as he appeared on Roll's shoulder, *"Let me tell you, it may have looked like our Loop, it was not."*

"Really? Well, the original Epsilon had it set up as Blood Gulch," Roll noted, recalling the DVDs, "Did you...?"

"If you're asking about Rock, then yes, yes I did," Bass confirmed, *"And let me tell you, he was weird. I mean, really weird. Even for him."*

"I...I think it's because of a theory Simmons and I came up with," Roll admitted, "Rock's been getting my memories– *all of them* –because I'm the Alpha and he's Epsilon. We haven't confirmed it or not if he's

also getting Delta and Theta's memories, but he may have been getting your own memories."

"Seriously?" Bass asked, *"I* really *hope he doesn't 'remember' what we did that one Loop."*

"U–I see him! I see him, he's in there. He's okay!" Caboose cheered.

"What? Let me see, moron," Sarge ordered, moving Caboose out of the way, "It's just a bunch o' circuits like last time."

"Yeah but they're glowing. He's alive!" Caboose cheered.

"Well get him outta there," Sarge ordered.

"No, no, dammit! Whyhyhy? Why did you do it?" Rock demanded as he appeared.

"Ep–Rock, you're alive! See–I knew it. See I told them! And she was right! We could get you out!" Caboose cheered.

"Dammit, Roll! Why? Why did you have to pull me out of there?!" Rock demanded, *"I was at peace! I was finally happy in this Loop!"*

"Dude, lay off her. She's been a wreck since you went in there!" Tucker frowned under his helmet.

"Screw you!" Rock snapped at Tucker, *"Why would you do that, Roll? Why?!"*

"Well, clearly it wasn't to hear 'thank you,'" Sarge grumbled.

" Thank you? *You fucked everything up! I was at peace–I had it figured out, it was over! Put me back!"*

"Put you back? Buddy, we just spent six months fixin' that there unit t' git y'all out. And now you wanna go back?"

"YES!"

Roll winced at that response. Bass frowned at Rock for that comment as the unawake Carolina entered.

"Hey there, Epsilon. Been looking for you for a long time."

"Oh no."

"Now that I've found you, you're gonna help me do what I should have done years ago: You're gonna help me kill the Director," Carolina demanded.

"Agent Carolina, what are you doing here!?" Rock demanded.

"I need your help. I'm tracking the Director of Project Freelancer and you're my best bet for figuring out what hole she's hiding in."

"Oh, I just love holes!" Donut beamed, "Especially those new ones that are so nice and tight and have this nice pressure around you as you stay in them."

"...The fuck did I just hear?!" Bass demanded in the awkward silence that soon followed, Roll trying to look away from Donut while hiding her blush.

"It's Donut," Roll replied, "He...He just does that."

"Everyone, just shut the hell up!" Rock barked as he turned to Carolina, *"What are you doing alive Carolina? You're supposed to be dead. This is impossible."*

"That's a funny thing to say, for a guy who's literally a ghost," Sarge pointed out.

"Yeah, uh, actually he's not a ghost, um, he's a computer program. He gets holographically projected on our armor when he wants to talk to us."

"Seismographic computer programs? Heh heh, Caboose you say the craziest things sometimes. What an imagination on you."

"Yeah, I don't know what that first word means but it sounds the same. I will allow it."

"..." Bass looked at Roll with a raised brow.

"What? They've been trying to help him learn some stuff, but it hasn't gone well," Roll noted.

"Heh. Not surprised. This place was terrible already," Rock snorted before leaving, *"Whatever. Screw you guys, I'm out of here."*

"Rock!" Roll called out before sighing, "Oh, Rock..."

"Agent Carolina," Delta appeared on her shoulder.

"Delta?" Carolina asked.

"Reports of my termination have been greatly exaggerated," Delta informed, *"I believe it would be best you pursue Epsilon immediately. From all of us, you would be the most optimum in getting his cooperation. You are primarily an unknown to him while the rest of us have had prior interactions to him as you have seen."*

Carolina snorted, but left. Delta appeared on Donut's shoulder. He looked over at the supply closet to see York fall out of it. Tucker looked over at Roll.

"Roll, don't you dare," Tucker warned, "Yo, Bass, you may want to have some private talk with her right now, okay?"

"You're my problem!-! You've always been my problem!-! Each and every one of you is just a problem that I have to deal with on a daily basis!-! AND YOU! YOU HAVE BEEN A PROBLEM–NOTHING BUT A PAIN IN MY ASS–EVER SINCE THE DAMN LOOPS BEGAN!-!-! EVER MORE IN THIS LOOP THAN ANY DAMN OTHER!-! I WISH THAT YOU NEVER HAD TO LOOP!"

Roll winced as she remembered what had happened just a few hours ago. Outside of Blue Base, she could hear the sound of boulders being broken, but she couldn't care to get up from her bed. She... She knew it was just the issue of being Epsilon that was making Rock so mad, but... but did he have to say all that? Sure, it was annoying at times when you're Awake but someone else is there you know is Looping and they're not Awake... but still. The hiss of her door opening didn't earn a reaction from her.

"Get up," Roll didn't acknowledge Tucker. "We're going after them."

"Why? He...He doesn't want us. He doesn't want me around..."

"Roll, this is the first time anyone has ever replaced Epsilon," Tucker informed, "In fact, I don't think anyone *but* Epsilon could handle the stress and strain of being the Memory to so many AI Fragments. I don't know if he'll recover or not from this Loop, but Delta says that he has a better chance of this problem only being for this Loop than it sticking to him. And Delta's the smartest guy I know."

"..."

"So why! Should I! Give a! Damn about! That bastard?!" Bass grunted with each boulder he broke, Washington standing near him.

"Right now, Carolina and Rock are going up against an army of you. The only way Rock or Roll can get an opening to the copy of you that is running all those robots is if we can get everyone there and fight them off," Washington informed, "Bass, you wanted to know more about yourself this Loop, and right now...This is your best chance."

"..."

"I won't say that I know what you're going through, because frankly, I don't. But right now, I do know how it feels to feel betrayed by someone you knew, or at least...you thought you knew," Washington informed, "When we do a Baseline, Carolina..." he sighed, "When

Carolina appeared, I thought it would be like back during Project Freelancer's early days before the Ranking was getting to the others. Me, being the new guy who still hasn't figured out what happened to Agent Georgia, and her the older sister figure and bit of a mentor to the new guy." he shook his head, "What a fool I was, huh? All that time she was considered 'dead' was her just obsessed with killing the Director no matter what. I tried to remind her of the good times, but she kept turning me away. It was when she threatened to kill one of the guys like she did here...I just gave up on her. I let go of the past and moved on." he turned, "Grif has a Pelican ready to take us to the Director. It'll take an hour or so to get ready." he walked off, "It's your choice. Do you want to keep holding it in, or just let it go?"

"..." Bass slammed his fist against a boulder, *not* breaking it.

"This is it."

"Ready to meet your maker?" Carolina asked, readying her gun.

'Yeah. This Loop's creator of me,' Rock thought, *"I got your back, Carolina."*

Carolina and Rock entered one of the teleporters in the abandoned structure they were in. Carolina exited before stopping, both surprised by what they saw.

"Oh no..."

"Rock, what is this?" Carolina asked.

"She kept trying... She kept trying to get him right..." Rock shivered.

"You think these things are anything like the real deal?" Carolina asked, glancing out at the large army of robotic Agent Tex/Bass clones, as one stepped forward to the front, punched its fist into its palm, and cracked its neck.

"You have no idea what kind of trouble you are in," the drone stated, giving a dark chuckle.

Carolina raised her plasma rifles, "Alright. Me first."

The army of Bass drones charged. Carolina fired her rifles at the approaching army, downing a few drones. A warning appeared in Rock's eye.

"Watch your left!"

Carolina looked to her left and dodged a drone's attack, dropping her rifles and pulling out a shotgun. She fired at an approaching drone, and leapt into the middle of the fray.

"Uh, I think I'm gonna be sick!" Rock groaned, his eyes swirling.

Carolina managed to hold her own against the drones until one of them knocked the shotgun out of her hands. She then switched to hand to hand combat, taking out more drones. She punched one of them, sending it flying into a crate. The crate was dented by the impact, and the one stacked on top of it fell to the ground. It split open, revealing its cargo of frag grenades. They spilled all over the floor, tripping two drones when they stepped on them. Carolina regained her footing and quickly looked down. She kicked a grenade up and into a approaching drone. Carolina then pulled out her grappling gun and fired at the grenade, the claws of the gun grasping it tightly. She swung the grenade into the drones like a flail, at times adding jumps and flips to further the weapon's momentum. The grenade was swung into the ground at the end of the attacks, causing it and a few other grenades to explode. A drone approached Carolina in a body rush.

"Watch out!"

The drone tackled Carolina, sending her flying and causing her to lose her grappling gun. She got up on one knee and growled.

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"Yeah, uh, sorry, Carolina, but, seeing this many ex-boyfriends while I keep getting the Alpha's memories in one room kinda has me terrified beyond the capacity for rational thought," Rock admitted, *"...Don't tell anyone I just said that!"*

"Well, snap out of it! I need you!" Carolina snapped as her legs started to vibrate a bit before shooting off in a teal blur.

"Need me for–WOAH!"

"Rock!"

"Right, right!"

Carolina sprinted to the end of the room, and spun around, taking out more drones.

"Carolina, I don't think I can do this much longer!"

"Just hold on!" Carolina dashed out of combat for a moment.

"Seriously! You need to slow down!"

"No!" She dashed back in and engaged the drones, "I can do this!"

"Carolina!"

Carolina charged past the drones furiously, ignoring Rock's protests. As she fought, memories began to play through her head, all about her faults and her obsession with winning. Rock kept trying to get through to her, but to no avail. Carolina charged past the drones, and was hit, sent flying into a crate.

"Come on, get up!" Rock pleaded as Carolina stirred.

Carolina looked out at the army of drones.

"He was right... I can't do this. I can't beat him," Carolina stood up, "I could *never* beat him."

"B-better luck next time, C-Carolina," one of the drones informed, its voice glitching as it aimed a gun at her.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, three plasma grenades stuck to three drone's heads. Carolina looked for the thrower, who was revealed to be Donut. He stood alongside Grif, York, and Sarge.

"Nine points, ya dirty bastards!" Donut taunted.

Carolina ran and rolls out of the blast. The grenades exploded, sending the drones flying. Carolina skidded to Wash's feet. Wash extended his hand.

"Get up."

"What are you doing here?" Carolina demanded as she took Wash's hand, and was hoisted to her feet with Bass's help.

"York and I told you they're not so bad once you get to know them," Wash pointed out.

"Ugh. Promise me that you'll never get this obsessed, Roll," Bass shuddered as he looked at the army of him.

"Depends," Roll replied as she readied her broom.

"You may need this, Carol," York advised as he gave her a Magnum.

"Oh. I thought this wasn't your fight," Rock noted, appearing on Roll's shoulder.

"Come on, overwhelming odds with little to no chance of success? How could we resist?" Sarge smirked.

"Best odds of all," Bass added with a grin.

"You got a problem with that, Rock?" Roll asked.

"Guys, I am an asshole, and I have been a horrible brother this Loop to you, Roll. I admit it, and I will gladly accept any and all smart-ass remarks after this is over. But I'd like to point out the fact that we're standing in a room full of crazy Freelancer robots that are ready to completely and utterly fuck our shit up."

"So... cheesy forgiveness speech later?" Tucker offered.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Bass smirked, throwing a spare body of Rock's out of his Pocket.

"Lock and load, people!" Carolina ordered, readying her Magnum.

The Reds, Wash, and Carolina readied their weapons. Tucker brought out his sword as Roll spun her broom like a bo staff. Rock and Bass readied their Busters as York summoned his Keyblades and assumed a fighting stance. Delta and Theta appeared beside Caboose, who was facing the wrong way.

"Caboose, we require you to get enraged, understand?" Delta asked.

"Okay," Caboose replied, "...Yeah, I don't remember how to do that."

"...We do," the two AI replied.

The two jumped into Caboose, who turned around to face the drones. He charged into the army, sending many of them flying. He rolled and stood up triumphantly.

"My name is Michael J. Caboose. And I..." He slammed his assault rifle into an approaching drone, "hate..." Caboose continued taking out the drones with an uppercut, kicking one into a group, and spinning around another into more, "...Fishes!"

"It's "Bass", you idiot!" Grif corrected. (21)

"That too!" Caboose agreed as he began to fire his Assault Rifle.

"Come on, everyone! Now's our chance!" Rock ordered as he started charging and firing his buster.

"For our ancestors' ancestors! Attack!" Sarge roared out as the others charged in.

Carolina was the first there, slamming a roundhouse into a drone. One tried to get her from behind, but Bass blasted its upper body to bits from a Buster shot. Thunder rumbled before a Thundaga Spell slammed into the ground, frying the circuits of the drones surrounding York. He blocked the shot of one drone with one blade while stabbing another with his other Keyblade, releasing a Fire Spell into it to melt the drone.

"Donut, look out!" Sarge warned as a drone approached Donut, causing him to whimper in fear.

"Donut, Warfstache!" Roll called.

"Oh! Yeah!" Donut nodded before quickly putting it on, "OH MY GOD! I AM SO FUCKIN' ANGRY! RAAAAAAAAAAA!" he tore the drone approaching him in two, "I AM WILFRED WARFSTACHE AND I! AM! HUNGRY FOR MEAT!"

"This is going to be a pain, won't it?" Washington shook his head as he shot the head off a drone.

A pair of drones knocked Grif down and opened up his legs. A trio of drones attempted to follow up with a piledrive into his groin, but Carolina and Roll intercepted them. The duo let go of Grif and quickly knocked Carolina back before Roll dispatched them both. Grif stood up, but another pair quickly hit him twice in the groin.

"Ow! Not again!" Grif cried out, his head slamming into York's groin.

"Gaaaah!" York cried out, dropping his Keyblades, "What the hell?!"

"Oh come on! You had to see that coming," Tucker shook his head at the two.

York recovered enough to pick up his blades. They soon rushed to rejoin the group, who were now surrounded in the middle of the room. They fended off many of the drones with gunshots, sword swings, Spells, Warfstaches, and brutal beat ups mixed with Buster shots and brooms.

"It's not working! There's too many of them and I think they're adapting to our attacks!" Simmons cried out.

"Rock, do you remember how your sister and the other AI were able to stop the Meta?" Washington asked.

"Yeah, but that was one guy. Not a hundred," Rock pointed out.

"There's only one Bass. And right now, Rock...nobody knows him like you."

"Alright, stand back everybody. This is going to get a little...personal," Rock advised, exiting his body.

His AI appeared in the middle of the circle at the size of his body. It flashed before splitting into hundreds upon hundreds of copies that quickly went into the drones. Rock swore he heard a sad guitar play as he entered a spacious metal room from an empty corridor, a slumped over copy of Bass in the middle of the room.

"Hey, there," *Rock's greeting startled the Bass copy.*

"Huh? Who the hell are you?" *the other Bass demanded.*

"You don't... you don't know me?"

"Ugh...I'm-I'm sorry, I'm just really...tired. And...I'm really tired. Um, my-my name's..." *the other Bass trailed off, not sure what his name was.*

"Your name is Texas. You're Forte," *Rock informed.*

"Right. Right, um... Forte," *the copy tried the name out,* "Yeah. That's me. And you're...?"

"Let's just say we... we used to be close friends through my sister."

"Oh. Okay."

"I need you to rest now, Forte."

"Oh, rest. Heh...I'd like that," *Forte gave a small, silly smile in his tired state.*

"I thought you might. Uh, look, I have to go now, but... you just rest, okay? Goodbye," *Rock informed, starting to turn to leave.*

"Weird. I don't know why, but I hate goodbyes," *Forte tiredly chuckled.*

"I know why," *Rock uneasily replied before giving a sigh as he faded out and the room turned to white,* "Goodbye."

The drones started malfunctioning and shut down. Bass frowned at the one he was fighting had collapsed before shrugging and teabagged it for a moment or two to spite the machine. Once the last drone fell over, Rock reappeared.

"Uh, you know, you could have done that *before* I got punched in the nuts by twenty of them at once," Grif advised.

"And forty to mine!" York added, his voice a bit squeaky still.

"Yeah, but where's the fun in that?" Roll teased.

"Nice going there, kid. I guess sometimes little fairies really do make wishes come true," Sarge noted.

"I could have told you that!" Donut beamed.

"I am not a fairy!" Rock demanded.

"What about that time you were a Shiny Sylveon?" Roll pointed out.

"...I hate you right now, you know that right?" (22)

"So... I guess our work here is done?" Simmons asked, unsure if there was any new surprises this Loop.

"There's still the director," Washington informed.

"No. What comes next..." Rock looked over at Carolina, Bass, Theta, Delta, and Roll, *"...The six of us need to do alone."*

Roll gave an uneasy gulp. She wasn't sure what to feel now that she was meeting this other her. She blinked before looking at Bass. He gave her a small, reassuring smile while holding his hand up, revealing her own held in it. Roll nodded before Delta appeared on her shoulder, Theta on Bass's, and Rock on Carolina's. The three walked off, heading for the Director.

"Beginning playback," the voice of FILSS was the first thing Roll heard as the six entered the dark, barren room, a lone chair with a figure gazing upon a wall, displaying a video.

"Roll, come on, stop it, put that thing down. You're gonna make me and your brother late, they're waiting for us," Bass gazed upon the reflection of who he was based upon this Loop, his copy being that of a young man who seemed to be full of life.

"Hello, Director," Carolina's greeting made them come to their senses and look at the chair, revealing a woman with her long, silver hair done in a ponytail and sunglasses over her eyes.

"Hello, Agent Carolina. Would you like to watch this file with me?" the Director asked, Roll flinching at just how much the Director sounded like her if she had a bit of a Western tone to it.

"No," Carolina replied.

"Play it again, FILSS," the Director ordered.

"Director?"

" *Again* !" The Director demanded, smashing her fist onto the arm of her chair.

"So, this is what you've become," Delta noted.

The Director lowered her head in sadness, "I just need to watch this. I think I have a way... a way to bring him back right this time."

"Um...B-But the authorities are hunting you now. If we found you, they will too."

"I just need a bit more time, Theta."

"No! You've had your fucking time," Rock growled as he forced the director to turn around, poking her in the chest with each sentence, "You have to answer for what you did. To the Meta, to Washington, to Carolina, to me, to Theta, to Delta, to Roll, to Bass, and to him! To Forte!"

"Hello, Epsilon. You came all this way just to see me?" the Director asked.

'Has...Has she even been eating? Bathed? Slept at all?!' Roll thought, looking at how thin her other self was now...how weak she seemed to be.

"I'm here to remember what you've done. Somebody has to!"

"Rock..." Bass began before Rock turned to him.

"Not all of us got off scot free, Bass!" Rock snapped before his body seemed to change into an exact copy of Delta, *"She was Brilliant..."* he then changed into Theta, a skateboard in his hand, *"...and we*

Trusted him!" he changed into his normal self, but his blue replaced with cyan and his white with a pale blue, ***"BUT SHE LIED TO US. SHE TWISTED..."*** Roll and Bass stepped back as Rock changed into Waltz, a dark burning aura coming off him/her, **"...AND TORTURED US! SHE USED US!"** he changed back into what seemed to just be a literal shadow of himself, a dark fire-like aura coming off him, ***"Manipulated us for her own purposes! And for* what *?! For this?! This...* Shadow *?!"*** Roll and Bass noted the echo effect his last change had as he turned back, tears welling in his eyes, "She *needs* to pay!"

Carolina removed her helmet, revealing her normally red hair was a mix of yellow with black highlights this Loop, and stared at the Director. The Director removed her glasses and hesitantly looked up at Carolina, revealing she had the same eyes as her. Roll winced, seeing the large bags under her eyes.

"And, don't worry, you'll see me again," Bass noticed the video was continuing to play.

Carolina continued to stare at the Director, and seemed to become sadder with every second she looked at her. She leaned down, and kissed her softly on the forehead.

"Just a bit more time," the Director tiredly pleaded, turning back to the video.

"Come on. We're leaving," Carolina ordered.

"I thought we came all this way to kill her," Rock scowled.

"Rock, remember what you learned in the memory unit? You need to let go. Your past doesn't define who you are. It just gives you the starting point for who you're going to be," Carolina advised before she turned to leave.

"Agent Carolina?" a frail hand taking her wrist made her stop.

"Yes, Director?" Carolina asked.

"Would you be so kind as to leave me your pistol?" the Director asked, Roll's eyes widening at that request.

'She...' Roll thought as Carolina removed her pistol from her holster and placed it on the Director's desk.

"Thank you, Carolina."

"Goodbye, Ma'am."

Carolina left the room, leaving just the AI Fragments and the three Loopers turned AI Fragments/AI and the Director alone.

"You were my greatest creation," the Director stated.

"I don't know what I or the other AI are, but I do know this–I'm more than just a copy of your brother and Roll is more than just a copy of you. We're better than you."

"I wasn't speaking to you five," the Director stated.

Rock snorted before turning and leaving. Slowly, the others soon followed. Only Roll stayed.

"Play it again, FILSS."

"Beginning playback."

"You're going to do this, huh?" Roll asked as the video of Forte began to play on the screen once again.

"Yes," the Director nodded, "Alpha...do you think I was ever close to getting back what I lost?"

"...I'm not sure, Director," Roll replied, "But...I think you were close. Even if Epsilon and Agent Texas are just fragments of me, it feels

like they're my brother and my boyfriend respectively. So, you must have been close. ...Thank you for creating me, Dr. Roll Church."

The Director nodded as Roll left, "Thank you, FILSS. Now, I would like you to erase all our files except for this one."

" All *our files? Does that include* me *, Director?"*

"It has been a pleasure working with you, FILSS. I am sorry."

"And, you, as well, Director."

"And, before you do, please shut down all the facility systems as well. Take everything offline."

"Director, this is a sealed facility. If I shut down all the systems, life support would not..."

"Thank you, FILSS. Shut them all down. Lock me in."

"Alright. Was the project a success? Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No. No, I did not. But I believe I might have come very close. I wish... I wish I knew."

"I see."

"Perhaps the next time around."

The Director raised Carolina's pistol to her chin, as the door to her room began to close, FILSS speaking her last words, *"It has been an honor, Ma'am."*

The door closed and locked down, the last words escaping the room were the video's, *"Don't say goodbye. I hate goodbyes."*

Bass walked out and was hit with a rock. He froze for a moment before he started to tremble in anger. He let out an enraged snarl as he glared at the direction the rock came from.

"...Uh-oh," Washington gulped.

"Run!" Simmons freaked as the two ran off.

"BASTARDS!" Bass snapped as he charged after them.

"Ah! Bass!" Roll called as she ran after him, leaving just Rock and Carolina behind.

"I guess that's that," Rock noted.

"I guess it is," Carolina agreed as they watched the havoc the four running around was causing.

"Carolina, after everything we've been through, I just, um... I just want to say thanks," Rock informed.

"You're thanking me? For what?" Carolina asked.

"For showing me a different side of myself."

"Same here," Carolina agreed before shaking her head, "Ah. So we finished, huh?"

"You... You're Awake now?"

"Yeah," Carolina nodded before she smirked, seeing Grif was being used by Bass to beat up Washington and Simmons, "You know, things aren't going to get any better this Loop."

"They aren't?"

"No," Carolina shook her head, "I can take you to it."

"Show me," Rock ordered.

"Private Grif, front and center on the double!"

"Urgh, Sarge, I'm tired. Do I have to do it on the double?" Grif whined as he exited out of the small base they had made.

"Look at me, Sir! I got front and center on the triple!"

"Dag-nabit, now Ah've got two insubordinate soldiers. When Ah say double, Ah mean *double* ! Nice work on that, by the way, Agent York," Sarge nodded.

"Thanks," York mock-saluted.

"I will only go so far as single and a half," Grif stated.

"If these orders were hamburgers, then you'd do a double," Delta informed.

"What? Who has hamburgers? Maya Fey, prepare to die!" Grif declared, pulling his stolen weapon from the Meta from out of his Pocket.

"Th' only hamburger meat here is gonna be your face when Ah'm done with my shotgun court-martial! And don't even ask me about th' type of buns."

"That sounds like the most delicious punishment ever..." Grif sighed.

"...of all time," York added.

Over at the Blue Base, Caboose was messing with something. Tucker ran out with Roll.

"Caboose! Don't touch that, you'll break it!" Roll warned.

"Oh, no, I won't..." Something shortwired and Caboose stood up, "...I broke it... Tucker did it."

"Dude, you can't say that when I'm right here."

"Tucker said it."

"Oh, my god, shut up," Tucker groaned as Washington emerged from the base.

"Both of you shut up! And get back to work!" Washington snapped.

"What do you mean "back to work?" That implies previous work."

"I am putting my back to work," Caboose stated, earning a giggle from Roll.

"Right on it, Wash!" Roll saluted as she took her broom out.

"We'll do our best, Washington!" Theta saluted on Roll's shoulder.

Carolina looked down at the two teams. Rock appeared on Carolina's left shoulder while Bass appeared on her right shoulder.

"Seems like they're getting settled."

"Yep," Rock agreed.

"So I guess everything is finally getting back to normal."

"What passes for normal around here, sure. What can I tell ya? We're home. I mean–they're home," Bass noted.

"Can I make a suggestion? Don't say goodbye."

"Goodbye? I didn't realize I was going somewhere," Rock noted.

"I intercepted a military transmission. It seems some low level thugs have some armor and equipment that's way above their paygrade. Sounds like it might be some of the missing gear from a certain defunct military project we both know."

"Is that right?" Bass asked as he got into his suit.

"Think I'll go get it back. Hate to think about it being in the wrong hands."

"And?" Rock smirked.

"And, with all that equipment I could really use someone to help me run it. You seem uniquely qualified for the job."

"...I don't know."

"I'm in," Bass smirked, "I've been wanting to get my hands on some of the sweet upgrades this Loop has."

"I figured we could set some things right. That we helped make wrong," Carolina informed.

"That's a lot of things to make right."

"Yep. Could keep us busy for quite a while," Carolina noted.

"It would be nice to be a good guy again."

"And not a pain the arse like you have been this Loop?" Bass smirked.

"...Shut up. You're lucky Delta figured out how to cut you off from this Epsilon Effect I've got," Rock frowned, *"Otherwise you'd be down there with the others."*

"Rock, Bass, what you two and I were involved with this Loop... the things we helped do... I'll be honest–I don't know if we can ever get all the way back to good," Carolina shook her head, "But I think that we have a chance to do better. And if we wake up everyday and try to make things better, eventually, we might find that better is good enough."

"Good enough..." both replied.

"Good enough," Carolina nodded.

"Yeah, still, I hate to leave without saying something. They deserve to at least hear goodbye," Rock noted.

"My Baseline mother and this Loop version of my father had a saying. Did I ever tell you about my mother from Baseline or the father I had for this Loop?"

"No, I don't think you ever did," Bass chuckled, "Let's hear about your mom in Baseline."

"She wasn't around a lot when I was a kid. And when she was she could only stay a short time. Seems like she always had somewhere else to be. Something important to do. And when she left, she wouldn't say goodbye to me. Instead, she always told me, "Never say goodbye. If you don't say goodbye then you aren't really gone, you just aren't here right now."

"Your mother sounds like a smart lady," Rock noted, glancing over at Bass.

"She was, she really was. Had terrible taste in men though."

Bass chuckled at that. Rock snickered a bit, having to agree.

"Hey, Rock-Church! Bass-Texas! Come down here! We wanna show you something! Rock-Church! Bass-Texas!" Caboose called before the three suddenly disappeared, "...Church? Tex?"

"Hey, Caboose, you find them?" Roll asked.

"Nah, I didn't find them," Caboose replied.

"Well, where do you think they are?" Tucker asked.

"I don't know, somewhere. They're... just not here right now," Caboose replied.

The three walked back into Blue Base. At the top of the hill the three had been on, Rock's buster was lying on it beside Bass's buster.

'Diary Entry One-Zero-One. It's been a while since I've done one of these for you, so sorry about that. From what I've read, the last time I ever really wrote in you was the day before we found Rock was Epsilon. So...yeah. Let's, uh, let's get caught up to speed. While Rock was with us, he was...stressed to put it mildly and wanting to cause another crash just to end this Loop to put it at the worst. As the eight months he was with us in Valhalla before going into a memory unit for another nine months, he was getting all the memories of myself, Delta, Theta, and Bass once we found him in a facility (and he beat the others up),' Roll smiled a little as she typed her current Loop's diary entry before frowning a little in guilt, *'I'll admit that...that I decided to just get drunk for those nine months he and Bass were stuck in the Memory Unit, depressed about what happened. And when Rock came out, he was angrier than before and...and it wasn't good. I thought that he would never want to be in a Loop with me ever again, that he hated me and never wanted to be my brother ever again. I almost went back to the bottle... But then... I met the Reds and Blues.'* she smiled a little as her memories of this Loop came to the front of her mind before she pulled up a picture of everyone, Sarge shaking hands with an elder man in a brown suit, *'This is a picture of everyone. Their Anchor, Michael J. Caboose, is such an innocent guy aside from his mental issues. When he's around, I can't help but feel mixed between annoyed with his antics and just wanting to treat him like a little brother. The Reds... their Unawake selves made me decide to not wear red for the next few Loops after this one. Agent New York AKA Foxtrot AKA York is an honorary Red along with Delta and Theta. There's another Looper, Agent North Dakota, from this Loop, but he died before he could Wake.'* she hoped to meet the guy one of these Loops since Theta had a big love for the man as a father figure, *'When I first met Tucker, I thought he was a pervert that would have sex with anything... until I met Sister. Sorry, Grif, but Sister... I wanted to murder her the moment she said something.'* she quickly went to the

next paragraph, *'Washington has been a good second-in-command for Blue Team. Epsilon–the one of their Loop–really messed him up in the head in Baseline and I feel so bad about what happened, but he said that he's been getting over it with the help of the Reds and Blues. Sarge seems to be the 'dad' of the 'family' these Loopers have seemed to make of themselves with Caboose and Theta tied for being the 'youngest son'. It's... kinda nice. Despite how much they all act like they're not really fans of each other (though I'm pretty sure Sarge's issues with Grif are genuine), they care for one another as a real family,'* she looked out at the scenery. *'Right now, we're on the Planet Chorus due to a malfunction in our ship. Caboose isn't to blame. He was with me the entire time,'* she frowned a little, recalling something else. *'This Loop has truly been interesting to experience. At times, it feels more like a comedy than anything. Other times, it's been... difficult. The version of me that was made this Loop as the one who I was based off of... she lost her husband and her brother early in the Sangheili attacks before Mjolnir Armor was made standard issued. She just couldn't let go of them, eventually resulting in the Beta being made from me after my Unawake self was tortured to the point of fragmenting. I'm unsure of how she was able to create the AI Fragments from that, but the person I saw... she was broken. Not just in her heart,not just in her position, but everything about her was just... broken. I'm... I'm still shocked at that she chose to do what she did, but I guess that she felt she didn't have anything else. Well, that's enough, I guess. Until next time, Diary. L...'*

BOOM

"Oh what now?!" Roll groaned, looking up from her diary entry to see a smoke cloud over at Red Base.

She walked over to see Sarge manning a tank and shooting at their base... specifically, Grif.

"What the fuck?! Why do you always shoot at me in the tank whenever we end up on Chorus?!"

"Because we never tell you we're going to renovate the base!" Simmons replied from beside the tank.

"At least this time it's not inverted," Sarge chuckled.

"Sarge, what are you doing?" Roll asked.

"Going to renovate th' base," Sarge replied, "We're dealin' with Space Pirates now, so we need t' take them on, Space Marine-style."

"Sarge, I told you that we don't have any Devil Fruits," Simmons sighed, "None of us aside from Tucker has ever been in the One Piece Loops and he replaced Zoro that Loop."

"Huh. So that explains how he can split his sword into three lightsabers," Roll noted.

"They're called 'beam katana'," Simmons corrected, "Tucker hates it when someone calls that mode of his sword that."

"He does?" Roll raised a brow.

"Eeyup. Made th' mistake a few Loops after he got that new mode fer his sword," Sarge noted, "Ah'd rather not remember. Then again, Ah had some Brain Bleach so Ah don't remember..."

"Okay. Caboose, did you agree to this?" Roll asked, the Anchor for the RvB Loop behind her.

"I got cookies and milk for it," Caboose informed.

"What kind of cookies?"

"Chocolate chip covered in chocolate and vanilla sauce."

"Yin-Yang Cookies," Simmons stated, "I tried a cookie like that in the Hub Loop and Caboose ate the entire box of them when I gave him one."

"...He's not going to go Grif and Maya Fey on us, is he?" Roll asked.

"No," Simmons replied, "Ch... er..." he looked at Caboose and then at Roll, " *You* grounded him."

"Sorry again."

"Okay, okay, so long as you know that you shouldn't follow Grif's lead like Maya Fey did," Roll noted.

"You should've been in the Minecraft Loop we had with her when it was involving Custom Mods," Simmons noted, "Exploding burgers, Oreo Creepers, and all sorts of weapons made from burgers and oreos were flying all about."

"How'd that happen?"

"Oh, Washington was getting sick and tired of how they were acting so he gave them an ultimatum; settle it out or he'd ask Caboose to call Yggdrasil."

"Wait, what?"

"I don't know. Ask Wash."

"I will. But first, I need that tank back."

"Aw... But Ah wasn't do..."

"Give her the damn tank already, you old fart!"

BOOM

"Fucking son of a bitch!" Grif cursed.

"Whoops. Finger slipped," Sarge's chuckle didn't assure Roll he was telling the truth.

"Yes. I made that threat, but it was an empty one. Caboose only plays checkers with the tree," Washington shrugged, "Aside from that and talking to it, he can't do a single thing to the tree. No suggestions, no requests, just checkers. Shame Maya Fey and Grif didn't know about that fact, but it was quite an enjoyable war between them."

"Dude, that still surprises me that he can play checkers with a tree."

"Well, it's part machine, so that'd be understandable," Washington noted.

"Huh?!" Roll gawked, "This is another 'It's just Caboose being Caboose' moment, isn't i–"

"Probably," Caboose confirmed.

"Hey, Caboose... Isn't this around the time you go out for a walk?" Tucker asked.

"A walk?" Caboose tilted his head.

"Freckles," Washington stated.

"Freckles?" Roll raised a brow as Caboose gasped.

"Freckles!" Caboose cheered as he ran off, "Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh boy..."

"Roll, could you go after him? Last time I reminded him about this, it... yeah, it didn't go well," Washington informed.

"Um... Okay?" Roll nodded as she ran after Caboose.

"...Should we have told her what Freckles is?" Tucker asked once Roll was gone.

"She'll figure it out," Washington replied, "In the meantime, we need to prepare for whatever Sarge makes this time."

"You know that's only when Sarge isn't Awake. Remember the time he built Bonnie?"

"Yeah," Washington nodded, "We were both awake while Caboose wasn't."

"Did he have to scream, though?" Tucker complained, "He sounds like a little kid screaming."

"..." Washington removed his helmet to give Tucker a 'Seriously?' look.

"...I'm sorry," Tucker gulped as Washington replaced his gauntlets with new ones that sparked.

"You remember the agreement we made with those four whenever we make fun of the gruesome thing that goes on in their Loop."

"Did you hear that?" Roll asked, pausing in her walk through a part of the half of the ship they were in.

"Heard what?" Caboose tilted his head.

"..." Roll shrugged before they continued walking.

"Tucker screamed it." Roll nearly fell over in surprise at that random statement.

"I forget, Caboose, just what are we looking for?" Roll asked.

"Freckles!" Caboose replied happily as they turned a corner, "Found him!"

Roll looked up... and up... and a little more up. Before them, parts of the body exposed, was a MANTIS-Class attack robot. She slowly looked over at Caboose as he pulled out a lot of tools and extra parts from his Pocket.

"Uh... Caboose? Th-This is Freckles? *This* is the pet you kept talking about?" Roll asked.

"Uh-huh!" Caboose beamed, "..."

"...Cab..."

"Oh! Almost forgot!" Caboose exclaimed as he took out another submachine gun from his Pocket with a USB attached to it, "Dr. Grey made this for me." he walked over to the MANTIS and plugged the gun, "Freckles! Are you sleeping?"

=NEGATIVE, CAPTAIN CABOOSE,= a squeaky voice came from the gun.

"...Did...Did you just put the AI of that Mantis into your gun?" Roll asked.

"Uh-huh! And he is awake!" Caboose cheered before running off, "I'm gonna go tell Washingtub we found him!"

"..." Roll looked at the machine and the pile of tools, "...Aw screw it. You never know when you'll need a giant robot that shoots missiles and bullets in this Loop."

The sounds of machinery proceeded.

"Well... He built something different," Tucker noted.

"Yeah," Washington agreed, "Um... Where did you...?"

"Found 'em up on that there hill," Sarge informed, "Normally, it's been a sniper rifle, but this time it was a pair o' blasters."

"Wait, what?" Tucker blinked.

"York, hand me that there screwdriver," Sarge ordered.

"Can d–wait,what are you planning to do?" York asked.

"Ah'm makin' sure everythin' is fine," Sarge snorted.

"Hey, everybody!" Caboose ran up, "We found Freckles!"

"That's good. You already fixed him up?" Washington asked.

"Um...Yeah," Caboose replied.

=GREETINGS, CAPTAIN WASHINGTON.=

"...He's in your g..." Washington began to ask.

"Probably," Caboose replied.

"..." Grif and Simmons shared a look.

"How did you...?" Grif began.

"Oh, the scary doctor lady gave me this when Epsilon-Church talked to her once," Caboose beamed, showing the USB cable.

"Of course..." Simmons facepalmed.

FWEE

"..." everyone looked at the confetti.

"...Tucker did it."

"Dude, I'm right here. You can't just blame me," Tucker shook his head.

"Men, Ah have done it," Sarge informed, standing in front of Grif, York, and Simmons while a cloaked item was beside Sarge, "It has taken me many Loops, but Ah finally figured it out."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Well?" Grif asked.

"What?" Sarge asked.

"What did you figure out?" Grif asked.

"Dr. Wily."

"...What?" Simmons blinked twice under his helmet.

"Bassnium. Ah finally figured out how he made it. Now when Ah'm awake before Ah finish Lopez, Ah'll be buildin' him with it," Sarge informed.

"What the... But... *How* ?!" Grif demanded.

"Crushed Oreos, Grif. The secret to making Bassnium is crushed Oreos," Sarge informed. (23)

"You monster!" Grif choked back a sob.

"With that discovery, Ah then went a step ahead and did what he did..." with that, Sarge removed the cloak, "And made this feller."

"Is... Is that supposed to be Zero?" York gulped, looking at the tall, menacing, red being with a white demon-like mask. (24)

"Of course he's Zero! Except Ah made him based off somethin' Ah found on th' Megaman Wikia in th' last Hub Loop," Sarge informed, "Meet Zero Dos Point 0."

"...He doesn't speak Spanish, does he?" Grif asked.

"No idea. Let turn him on!" Sarge declared, "Robot, Activate. Codeword... 'Activate'."

"Go aisatsu. Zero 2.0 O kassei-ka shite itadaki arigatōgozaimasu. Watashi wa anata o shien suru tame ni nani o suru koto ga dekiru (Greetings. Thank you for activating Zero 2.0. What may I do to assist you)?" the robot questioned.

"OH COME ON!"

"WHAT THE FUCK, SARGE?!"

"SERIOUSLY!?"

"GOOGLE TRANSLATED JAPANESE?!"

"ARE YOU ADDICTED TO GOOGLE TRANSLATE OR SOMETHING, SARGE?!"

"DA FUCK, SARGE?!"

"Zero, calm them down."

"Yosh (Yeah)," Zero 2.0 nodded before grabbing Grif and using him to beat up Simmons and York.

"Oh dear me," Delta noted on Sarge's shoulder, *"I really feel bad if we ever let the original Zero see this."*

"He'll think of it as a compliment," Sarge waved Delta off.

"Sōzōnushi, watashi wa seijō ni watashi no nakama no heishi o ochitsuite kita. Kono jiten de watashi no tame no nin'i no ta no junjo o motte imasu ka (Creator, I have successfully calmed down my fellow soldiers. Do you have any other orders for me at this time)?" Zero 2.0 asked as he dropped the groaning Grif on York and Simmons, earning a massive pained groan from all three.

"Eeyup. Go fix that there tower over there at Blue Base," Sarge ordered.

"Watashi wa, ichido sonoyōni watashi no mottomo kenkyona kurieitā o okonaimasu (I will do so at once, my most humble creator)," Zero 2.0 bowed before walking off.

"You actually understood him this time?" Delta asked.

"Ah studied Japanese fer quite a few Loops," Sarge informed.

"Um... Sarge?" Sarge turned to Washington and Roll as they walked over, Washington asking, "Wh... What *is* that thing you made?"

"Zero Dos Point 0."

"...You've got to be kidding me," Roll deadpanned.

"Enope," Sarge replied, "Since Ah have some bettin' with Delta, Ah can't make Lopez Dos Point 0 fer a while. So why not make homage t' Roll and her Loop by makin' a badass version of Zero?"

"I scanned him and it said he was made of Bassnium. How did you figure out how to create Bassnium? Dad has been trying to do that every time Wily makes it and has had no luck in it! How did you figure it out?!"

"Crushed Oreos," Sarge replied.

"...Crushed *Oreos* ?" Washington and Roll repeated.

"Eeyup. Crushed Oreos," Sarge confirmed.

"...I... I don't even... Nope. Not going to ask," Roll shook her head, "And the Japanese?"

"Ah love Google Translate," Sarge replied.

"Of course..." Roll facepalmed, "Well, Tucker's getting sword lessons from Zero 2.0..."

" *Dos* Point 0," Sarge corrected.

"Whatever," Roll rolled her eyes, "But, seriously, Tucker is learning from him."

"De iki (Breathe in)..." Zero 2.0 instructed as he and Tucker went through some motions, "... Soshite ikiwohaku (and breathe out)."

"He'll be fine," Sarge chuckled.

"Who?" Washington asked.

"Him."

"Who exactly will be fine?" Roll asked.

"Him, o' course."

"Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me...!" Roll growled, readying her umbrella to whack him upside the head.

"Roll, no!" Washington held her off, "Don't kill him! We still need him!"

It was official, Roll was ticked off with everything on Chorus so far. She had just finished fixing up Freckles's old body, only for Zero 2.0 to mistake it for an enemy and destroy it. Then, they were ambushed by the strangest people in white armor and saved by a guy in black and orange armor. Now...? Now she wanted to know just why *orange juice* seemed to be the cure all for everything?! (25)

"Hey," Roll turned to see the new guy walking over, "Nice to meet ya. Name's Felix. You weren't at the meeting where we all were, so I decided to just come find you to introduce myself and ask just why your awesome robot speaks terrible Japanese."

"Sarge learned Japanese from Google Translate," Roll deadpanned.

"That explains it."

"How's the leg?" Roll asked.

"Good. Still can't believe orange juice worked. I thought that was just some weird shit they made up," Felix noted.

"Same here. Next time my dad's not feeling well, I'm going to have him drink that with every meal," Roll shrugged, "That is, when I get off this planet."

"Well, that's going to be hard to do," Felix noted, "The Republic of Chorus won't let you leave that easy now that they know you're here."

"I see," Roll noted, "So why are you here?"

"Me? Can't a handsome rogue such as me..." Felix began.

"Were you paid to find us?"

"...Yep," Felix replied, "Heh. You seem much different from the others. Looks like you know that everyone has their price, huh?"

"Yeah," Roll replied, "For me, it's the others." she looked out to where Caboose was talking with Zero 2.0 and holding a sombrero, "Especially Caboose. He... Even with all the shit that's been going on, he... he feels like such an innocent little kid."

"Caboose? ...He's the one who uses a gun that shoots confetti, right?" Felix asked.

"Yeah," Roll replied, "He sees me as a big sister of sorts, so I'm the one in charge of keeping an eye on him. Oh,and to make sure he takes his pills every day."

"He takes pills?"

"Once during breakfast and once with dinner," Roll replied.

"Ah," Felix nodded, "So do you know about all the stuff here?"

"Yeah. All of it was destroyed in the landing. What you see around is was all we could salvage," Roll informed, *'Except for the stuff they let me put into my Pocket.'*

"Oh. I thought, you know, that there'd at least be something to help fight those guys off next time they come," Felix pointed out.

"It's fine, Felix. Sarge couldn't get Zero 2.0 to..."

" *DOS* POINT 0!"

"He heard that all the way in Red Base?" Roll blinked twice, "...Holy shit. He's got good hearing."

"And that is freaky," Felix pointed out.

"Agreed. Just don't get him started on the uses of cardboard cutouts. He won't stop talking," Roll informed.

"Cool, cool," Felix nodded.

"BaseBook?" Felix questioned as he looked at the screen.

"Yeah," Roll replied, "I told Simmons it'd be a bad idea since we do need this power, but he went and did it any... Huh. He made you an account, Felix."

"Wait, what?" Felix looked at the screen, "Son of a bitch." he clicked a button, "And his Friend Request is denied."

"And Sarge just posted that he's declaring a Red Team Meeting and that Blue Team sucks," Roll frowned, "...Yeah. See? This is why I will not be wearing anything red for a long while."

"Seriously?" Felix asked.

"Yeah. You know what the first things out of his mouth were to me once he learned my gender? Comments involving the stereotype of a housewife."

"Ouch," Felix winced.

"Yeah. But I showed him," Roll smirked as she held up her broom.

"...You cleaned his base?" Felix asked.

"Tucker!" Roll called.

"Yeah, Roll?" Tucker asked as he walked in…

-ONE SECOND LATER-

"Ow..." Tucker whimpered.

"..." Felix slowly poked out behind his energy shield and looked at Roll, "Yeah. I am... uh... yeah."

"Dude... She chased off *the Meta* with that..." Tucker groaned as Roll starting treating Tucker's bruises.

"The Meta?" Felix repeated, "I've read up on him. He was considered unstoppable but your two teams killed him."

"That was all Donut," Tucker informed, "If he puts on a pink mustache, don't be the enemy."

"...Okay?" Felix raised a brow.

"Status report!" Sarge ordered.

"Mines are all set up *and* buried," Grif informed.

"Zero 2.0..."

" *Dos* point 0."

"...and I finished setting up proximity alarms," York informed.

"I finished calculating all the signatures of everyone in this area so we cannot trip them," Delta informed.

"And I informed the Blues that the systems are all set up, but I didn't say *where* everything is," Simmons informed.

"Good work, Simmons. We'll outsmart that Space Pirate yet," Sarge informed, "Zero Dos Point 0, get ready fer war!"

"Hai," Zero 2.0 nodded.

"Lopez, help your baby brother get ready."

"No hablamos el mismo idioma, idiota (We don't speak the same language, idiot)," Lopez snorted.

"Donut, is everythin' packed?" Sarge ordered.

"Yes indeedy deed, Sarge!" Donut beamed, "I have everything all nice and packed up. All you need to do is shove your key into the hole, thrust it a bit just to make sure it's going in all the way, and then release!"

"...How does he not notice it?" York groaned.

"Watashi wa ē to... Watashi wa, kono koto ni yotte midasa kuriētā i... Desu (I am... um... I am disturbed by this, creator)," Zero 2.0 admitted.

"Ah'm with y'all in that boat, Zero Dos point 0, Ah'm with y'all in that boat."

"Espero que tanto mueres horriblemente y brutalmente, agradable y muriendo lentamente (I hope you both die horrifically and brutally, nice and slowly dying)," Lopez glowered.

"Aw...Thank, Lopez, Ah'm hopin' y'all will be beatin' them left and right, too," Sarge thanked, "Now let's go!"

"Okay, guys, meeting!" Washington ordered, "Roll, get Caboose!"

"Already got him!" Roll replied, using Caboose as piggyback with a fishing rod and a cupcake.

"That's pretty impressive," Felix noted.

"Took me a week to train him to do this," Roll smirked as she hopped off the Blue's back and gave him the cupcake.

"We just got word that the Reds have set up defenses. They never said what they set up, so they told us that we shouldn't leave the base to be safe," Washington informed, "So we're going to stay in the base until the next attack." a siren went off, "...And there it goes."

"Shit," Felix cursed.

"Message sent," Roll stated.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" Sarge ordered as Red Team drove around on their latest Warthog, York sitting behind the standing Simmons, shooting their guns at the white-armored soldiers.

"Shit! They're cutting us off from Blue Base!" Simmons cursed as Grif had to turn to avoid a missile aimed at the ground before them.

"Ah hell! I lost a Teleport Cube!" Grif cursed.

"What's going on out here?!" Doc demanded as he ran out... only to be hit on the head with the cube, "Huh?" he saw the cube as it

activated, "Aw sh..."

A flash of light and Doc was gone. His last thoughts were *'Again with this. I hate Teleport Cubes.'*

"Daijōbudesuka (Are you okay)?"

Roll groaned as she started coming to.

"Ah, good. You got her up," Roll turned her head a bit to see Felix approaching with two figures in camo-themed armor.

"Hai," Zero 2.0 nodded.

"Good thing you got to us before that last missile," Felix noted, "You okay?"

"Wh...What happened?" Roll groaned.

"They fired a missile at Blue Base and a rock the size of a truck landed on you," Washington informed, "thank god you were in your armor and that you're a robot. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here."

"What... The others?" Roll asked.

"The Reds were all captured or killed. I don't know," Washington replied, "Zero 2.0 here destroyed the rock you were under and took you to this tunnel. Felix and I had to destroy the entrance before the Federation could follow us."

"Where's Doc?" Roll asked.

"Doc? Huh... I... um..." Washington noted, trying to think, "I don't know. I always thought he was with the Reds."

"...Have you even watched your own videos?" Roll whispered.

"Yes... But I may have skipped an episode or two..."

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" Roll facepalmed, "Zero 2.0, kick his ass."

"Yosh!"

"Aw shit," Washington cursed before Zero 2.0's foot met his behind.

"What was that about?" Felix asked.

"He completely forgot about Doc," Roll snorted, "Let's get going. Take us to the Rebel Leader."

"Okay... Remind me that brooms are a bad thing to let you hold," Felix noted as Roll walked over to him, her broom on her back, while she walked away from the pile of her fellow ex-Project Freelancer Simulation Troops and their troops.

"Why?" Roll asked.

"Because I don't want to end up like that," Felix replied.

"...Hey! I got hit with a broom!" Caboose just realized.

"Shut up, Caboose..." Tucker, Simmons, and Grif groaned.

"Watashi wa machibuse de sono demo no soto ni taizai suru koto o eranda koto o ureshiku omoimasu (I am glad that I chose to stay out of that demonstration on ambush)," Zero 2.0 noted, not looking up from the guns he was repairing.

"Any chance we could..." Felix began.

"Sarge welded the port shut so we can't change the language chip."

"Son of a bitch," Felix muttered, "He's a great sparring partner, but that bad Google Translate..."

"Watashitachi no supā wa sukidesuga, sore wa anata ga eruvu~isu no koe o shite iru yō ni sa rete imasen (While I do enjoy our spars, it is not like you have the voice of Elvis)," Zero 2.0 pointed out.

"Oh, you want another round?" Felix asked.

"Yosh!" Zero 2.0 stood up.

"How about you two against me?" Roll offered.

"Iie/Hell no!" the two replied.

"That's what I thought," Roll giggled.

"What are you guys doing?" Roll asked as she walked in on her fellow Loopers standing before four soldiers.

"Trying to decide who gets to be leader of our new team," Tucker replied.

"...Dude, I call in favor of Roll," Tucker stated.

"Huh?" Roll blinked.

"Seconded," Simmons quickly added.

"Excuse me?" Roll's eyes widened.

"Pi," Caboose agreed.

"Okay!" Grif agreed.

"What's happening?!" Roll freaked.

"Okay! Everyone, meet our team leader!" Tucker informed, "Any words you want to say?"

"Yes, yes I do," Roll replied, "What. The. Hell. Just. Happened?" (26)

"It's not funny, Felix!" Roll pouted as Felix slapped his knee in laughter.

"Y-You're right-t! It's HILARIOUS!" Felix laughed, "Oh, you are going to have the worst time ever!"

"...You want to make a wager then?"

"What kind?" Felix sobered quickly.

"I bet that one of the resistance members that I am going to be teaching and leading will be able to capture you by the end of the week," Roll informed, "You win: I'll give you something way cooler than the alien tech you've been paid with."

"Oh? What's that?" Felix asked.

Roll walked behind a container and walked back out...wielding a small gun.

"That's it?"

Roll smirked. Turning to an empty container, she pulled the trigger. The gun fired a black beam. The second the beam hit the container, it disintegrated in a literal instant.

"...And if you win?" Felix asked.

"You get the gun and you have to go with us to retrieve the others that were captured by the Federation of Chorus."

"Deal."

Felix shook his head as he walked with Zero 2.0, who had finished sharpening his knives for him, "Man, do I feel sorry for Roll. I mean, seriously, you won't find me leading people."

"Hai," Zero nodded, "Matte."

"Huh?" Felix stopped, "What's up?"

POW

"OW! The back of my head!" Felix exclaimed as he collapsed.

"Holy shit," Palomo blinked twice as he looked at the downed Felix, broken broom held in hand, "I actually did it."

"Told you a broom was the better choice," Roll smirked as Grif grumbled as he handed Roll a packet of Oreos while Zero 2.0 tied Felix up, "Good work, Zero 2.0."

"DOS POINT 0!"

"Seriously... the fuck?!" Tucker demanded.

"It's Sarge," Simmons and Grif replied in unison.

"At least it proves Locus didn't kill them," Roll whispered.

WHACK

"OW! The back of my neck!" Roll yelped.

"Tucker did it," Caboose informed... holding his own broom.

"Caboose, go to the corner," Roll ordered.

"Aw man~!" Caboose whined as he walked over to a corner and sat down, putting a Dunce Cap on his head once he was there.

"Anata wa bachigaina sen o motte imasu. Watashi wa sore o shūsei shimasu (You have a wire out of place. I will fix it)," Zero 2.0 informed.

"Thank you," Roll thanked.

"Hey, Roll, I've been meaning to say something," Tucker noted.

"What?" Roll asked.

"Codeword: Dirtbag," Tucker informed.

WHACK

"Fuck! My balls!" Grif squeaked as he collapsed to the side as Roll's body corrected itself.

"Tucker," Roll pouted.

"What? I wanted to see if you still had it," Tucker chuckled.

"What is going on here?!" the ten turned to see the leader of the resistance, Vanessa Kimball, approach.

"We just caught Felix, ma'am," Palomo replied, "With a broom."

"I thought you said you wouldn't capture him," Kimball looked at Roll.

"Palomo did it," Roll replied, "He's a quick learner with a broom."

"I've been on cleaning detail every day I've been in this resistance," Palomo informed.

"That explains it," Roll noted as Felix began to come to.

"Ugh...What hit me?" Felix asked, "...Did I get drunk and have sex with Mary again?"

"That was you?!" Kimball demanded, causing Felix to look around.

"Ah hell!" Felix realized, "You guys actually did it?!"

"Yep," Tucker replied, *'For once.'*

"I've been making them all run the gauntlet so to say," Roll informed as she undid Felix's bindings.

"Well... A deal's a deal," Felix sighed.

"Yep. We'll be leaving in one hour," Roll ordered, tossing Felix his new gun, "And, Felix?"

"Yeah?"

Roll held her hand out, "Here's to a successful rescue operation."

"...Yeah," Felix nodded, shaking her hand.

"An hour?" Kimball asked, "But..."

"You agreed that if it was approved, you'd let me do whatever I want for this operation," Roll reminded.

"Fine," Kimball sighed, "Good luck. All of you."

"Okay, people, robot, and cyborg, let's get ready. One hour," Roll ordered.

Felix frowned as he looked at his new weapon. Sure... either way, he'd get the gun, but to be able to get the drop on him...

"Guess I underestimated them," Felix noted.

"That you did, Felix," Felix turned to Roll, "I want to make an offer with you." Felix gulped as Zero 2.0's blade was pressed against his neck, "One that you won't refuse."

"...How did you even do this so fast?" Felix asked as he looked at Grif, who had just finished disguising the now-dead Republic soldier as a snowman.

"Years of practice," Grif informed.

=Blood Gulch - One week before relocation=

"...Found him," Simmons informed, looking at a snoozing Grif amongst a puddle of water.

=Present=

"Right..." Felix slowly nodded, "And we didn't bring those four guys...why?"

"They're not ready for this," Roll replied, "Maybe with a bit more training, they would, but the sooner the better." she and Zero 2.0 turned to him as the others walked ahead, "You remember what the deal is, right?"

"Yeah yeah...Still...Why did you trust me with it?" Felix asked.

"Locus trusts you," Roll replied before she and Zero went after the others.

"..."

Roll wondered where it all went wrong. Oh yeah...This Loop happened. They managed to regroup with the missing members of their group and then everyone in the enemy army was being vaporized by something. The group ran out of the structure with Lopez carrying a shivering medic with purple coloration on her armor over his shoulders in a fireman's lift.

"If everyone wasn't dying around us, I'd want to ask just how you made this robot's armor so durable."

"Crushed Oreos," everyone replied followed by a choked sob from Grif.

"Can it, Dirtbag," Sarge ordered.

THWACK

"FUCK!" Grif squeaked.

"I hate this codeword," Roll muttered before stopping, "Ah hell."

"What?" Felix asked before a series of red lights shined on them all and a group of black-armored soldiers appeared on the higher level before them, "Shit."

"Like sheep to the pen," Locus chuckled as he appeared between two of the middle soldiers.

"Oh no," Washington groaned.

"You're ready for slaughter."

"Locus!" Tucker growled as he activated his blade.

"I advise you stand down, boy," Locus ordered.

"Here comes the monologue," Washington muttered.

"I told you, Agent Washington, I am a professional. I complete my missions at all costs. But you, and your comrades have put a blemish on my record," Locus informed, "This, is unacceptable."

"What are you talking about? You just killed the men you're working for!" Washington demanded, *'If you were working for them and not that bastard.'*

Locus gave a grunt, "It appears you don't understand after all. Unfortunate. You were such a fascinating soldier, Agent Washington."

Locus raised his sniper rifle while Tucker got ready to throw his grenade. Felix darted in front of Washington and raised his Hardlight Shield just as Locus fired.

"Tucker, grenade!" Roll ordered.

"Here!" Tucker tossed it to Roll.

Roll caught it and tossed it to Felix, "Felix!"

"Got it!" Felix called before catching it, "..." looking it over, he began to chuckle, "Ah, that was close! Nice throw, Tucker! You too, Roll!"

"Felix?" Tucker questioned, already knowing what was happening.

"How many times have I jumped in front of a bullet for you, Wash? Three? Those are some pretty great reflexes, huh? Most people would have to plan that sort of thing."

"Felix, what are you doing?" Roll asked.

"Just helping out an old acquaintance," Felix replied as he looked up at Locus, "You missed a spot."

"Are you done?" Locus demanded.

"Not even close," Felix replied before turning to them.

"Dude! Not cool!" York frowned.

"This doesn't make sense! That's Locus, your enemy!" Tucker acted.

"Riiight, and I'm the charismatic mercenary with a gruff exterior, but a heart of gold. A little too romantic, don't you think?"

"But the guy fucking shot you!" Simmons pointed out.

"Yeah, funny how an act of sacrifice like that buys you so much trust. And so much information."

"But you're supposed to hate each other!" Simmons pointed out.

"Most likely, they do hate one another," Delta noted.

"Got that right. After all, you should never mix friends with business."

"Wrap it up," Locus growled.

"But we just work so well together," Felix ignored.

"You dirty liar!" Sarge growled.

"Hey, whoa whoa whoa. I never actually *lied* to you idiots, okay? Well, except for once," Felix chuckled, "'You're some of the galaxy's greatest soldiers!'" he huffed, "Now that couldn't be farther from the truth. But, you know, it did make you the perfect candidates to lead the people of Chorus."

"Stop boasting and let me kill them. We have a job to do," Locus demanded.

"Ooh, that's right, he doesn't like you guys. He actually thinks there might be a few fighters among you. Ha! Told you he's crazy," Felix went on.

"But why? Why the capture, why make us part of this war?" York demanded.

"Well, you see-"

" *FELIX!"* Locus roared.

"No!" Felix turned to glare up at Locus, "I've had to put up with these morons every day, so you let me have this," Felix turned back to Washington, "You see, someone, somewhere, out in our galaxy, has their eye set on this planet. The only problem, is the inhabitants. Now, if it were up to me, I'd just nuke this place from orbit. But our employer, has other ideas."

'Control...' Tucker thought, *'They better get that extension up sooner than later. I want to kill that ass.'*

"We have to play this thing carefully, you understand? If an entire planet dies overnight, well, people ask questions. But if you stumble onto this rock and find that the settlers killed each other, well, that's just a tragedy!" Felix snorted.

"It was you. You started this war!" Roll accused.

"ERT! Wronng!" Felix buzzed, "These people hated each other way before our operation ever showed up, we just had to keep the hate train a-goin'. And let me tell you, you guys have helped so much." he gave a dry chuckle before coldly asking, "Does it hurt? Knowing just how much death you've brought to this planet?"

"Enough!" everyone looked up at the enraged Locus, "How many times must I tell you, if you want to make the victim suffer, you do it quickly, and efficiently. There will be no rescue for you. You will die here, *today* , along with the rest. No one will find your bodies, no one will know the truth, and *no one is going to stop us from killing every last person on this planet* !"

"You got that right!" Felix chuckled, "Oh, and by the way..." Felix went on, "...Five Mississippi."

"What?" Locus asked before Felix threw the grenade at Locus, the pin off.

BOOM

"Holy shit!" Tucker exclaimed as he watched the Space Pirates lose their guns, Grif quickly grabbing one.

"Mine, bitches!" Grif cackled.

"FELIX!" Locus snarled as the smoke cleared.

"Consider that my resignation from Charon Industries!" Felix declared, "Oh, and tell Control...'Hi, Malcolm'."

"That's new," one of the Space Pirates noted as she and another jumped down, their armor color shifting into a familiar pair of colors.

"Teleport away!" Bass declared, throwing a Future Cube on the floor and causing them to vanish in a flash of orange light.

Locus picked up one of the Space Pirates by his throat, "Call Control... *NOW* !"

A flash of light shined and everyone tumbled away from each other in the canyon-like area.

"Ugh... What just happened and why did it hurt?" Grif moaned.

"Ugh..." Felix stumbled over to move his head behind a rock, removed his helmet, and emptied his rations, "I hate those things...!"

"I think my insides were just outside," Caboose noted.

"Ugh, is everyone okay?" Washington groaned.

"You know, I never thought I'd be so glad to see you idiots again," Carolina joked, "Though... Why did Felix switch sides?"

"The lady and her friends are persuasive," Felix replied.

"Arigatou," Zero 2.0 informed.

"...Why is my baby brother here? And who hit him with the ugly stick?" Bass asked.

"Fuck you, asshole," Zero stated in perfect English.

"What the?!" Grif exclaimed.

"Nani?" Zero 2.0 looked at Grif.

"..." Bass facepalmed before pulling Zero 2.0 into a headlock and whispered, "How long have you been awake?"

"A week now," Zero quietly shrugged, "Been using the Google Translate Japanese to insult everyone. Some even think I'm having a completely different conversation. So what's going on here?"

"War, that's what," Bass muttered.

"Glad t' see y'all are okay," Sarge noted, "Carolina, Bass."

"That's not all!" Rock informed as he appeared next to Bass, *"Miss me, Assholes? 'Cause so far, I love this planet."*

"You fucks!" Roll snapped, throwing her gun away and whipping her broom out.

"Shit! Book it, man!" Rock freaked before the two ran off, Roll giving chase.

"I'm booking it! I'm booking it!" Bass freaked as he ran off, dragging Zero behind him.

"Why are you dragging me with you?!" Zero demanded.

"Sacrifice!" both shouted as Bass punted Zero at Roll.

THWACK

"...That girl scares me more than anyone I have ever met. Even the Insurrection wouldn't be able to scare me more," Felix stated as he looked at the Zero-shaped hole in the titanium wall embedded in the wall nearby.

"Well, there goes that question," Sarge snorted.

"Wait, so this means..." Tucker's eyes widened, "We need to get to the Rebel base... *now* ."

"Good luck with that," Felix snorted, "Most likely, the Space Pirates are already there, preparing to wipe them out the moment we get there. And if you want to send the message to everyone, I have a key card to shut down the communications tower."

"...Huddle," Carolina ordered.

"Oh, who's the purple girl?" Felix asked.

"That's Dr. Grey. She's like Doc... only far better," Tucker shrugged before going into the red and blue huddle.

"..." Felix looked at Dr. Grey, "...That is one fine ass."

"I know how to vivisect you and turn you into a female," Dr. Grey warned.

"Noted...and yet aroused."

=I SEE...SO FELIX HAS ABANDONED US. AN UNFORTUNATE SITUATION, I SUPPOSE,= Control noted.

"Sir, he knows all our codes, all the locations of our bases and the jamming stations," Locus informed, "We need to immediately reset all the security codes before..."

=Too late, Locus~= Locus growled as the image of Felix appeared by the screen Control was using before waving =Hi~=

=AH, FELIX. I'M QUITE DISAPPOINTED WITH YOU. TO THINK THAT YOU WOULD ABANDON EVERYTHING YOU'VE DONE OVER THE LAST SEVEN YEARS.=

=Aw stuff it, Malcom Hardgrove,= Felix snorted.

=...= the screen flickered before changing into the image of the man. =I must say that you surprise me, Felix. However did you figure it out?=

=Wasn't all that hard when you've got five AI that are interconnected,= Felix shrugged.

=Five AI?=

=*Sup?*= Rock greeted as he, Roll, Bass, Delta, and Theta appeared on Felix's head and shoulders.

=Are you seriously standing on my head?= Felix demanded.

=Hey! I'll have you know that I am the best! I bet if there were any aliens here, they'd be rapping out how I am the best while riding a pimped out ride or playing basketball.=

=*...*= Delta looked away from Rock, not wanting to inform him that that particular incident had happened more than once in the Loops he'd been awake in involving Epsilon and a group of aliens.

"Focus," Washington ordered.

"Yeah, yeah, Captain Grump-ass," Felix waved him off, "Anyways, just to let you know, I already made contact with UNSC. As of now, you are a wanted man, Malcom," Felix informed, "I'm getting a lighter sentence since I gave them all the info."

"We also got in touch with a friend o' ours," Sarge informed, "Y'all might remember him from th' picture in th' paper."

"Technically, it's a computer paper," Rock corrected as Bass showed a screen, showing a news article where Hardgrove was shaking Carolina's hand with the Reds and Blues standing near...and Petty Officer Master Chief shaking hands with Roll and Sarge.

'Thank goodness he's Awake,' Roll thought.

"I've got to admit: you guys knowing Master Chief *really* got me worried," Felix admitted, "I mean, if you were able to disable even

one of these towers, you could've sent a signal straight to him and there goes all the work."

=Felix!= Locus growled =You dare...?=

"Hey, I'd rather not die due to being impaled by a broom," Felix snorted before hearing a Wilhelm Scream, "Really, Zero?"

" *DOS POINT 0!"* Sarge snapped.

Zero shrugged as he tossed the latest of the dismembered Space Pirates into the waters below.

"You really should've contacted him sooner," Felix chuckled, "Now...all your plans are done for."

=Truly, I was not expecting you to do this,= Hardgrove noted with a frown =It seems there is no other choice: We go to war.=

"Riiight...See, here's the thing; this is being shown *live* to every single person on Chorus," Tucker smirked.

"Say 'Hi' to Planet Chorus, Malcom Hardgrove," Rock chuckled, *"By the way, thanks so much for all the free tech you've been reverse engineering=*

=So you are the one who's been stealing all the tech from my bases.=

"Well...Me, Bass, and Carolina= Rock shrugged.

"Hey, we were just hoping to read you a letter," Washington informed.

"It's jest a little somethin' we put together for ya. Considerin' we'll probably be seein' a lot of each other over th' next few weeks," Sarge chuckled.

"Take it away, girls," Tucker offered to Carolina, Dr. Grey, and Roll.

"Ahem...'Dear Chairman; It has come to our attention that you have declared war on the planet Chorus," Carolina began as Roll went into her body.

"We regret to inform you that this is a really shitty idea. Not only have you managed to annoy the people that you failed to kill, time and time again, you've also found a way to piss off an *entire planet* ," Roll continued.

"Now we may not have the best equipment and we might not be the best fighters, but as you're aware, we've been fighting for a *very* long time," Dr. Grey added, "And now that we're not fighting each other, we're more than happy to dedicate all of our time to fighting you."

"So *dear Chairman* , to you and your idiotic mercenaries, we would like to say: bring it on, motherfuckers!" Roll ordered, "We're not going anywhere."

"From your friends, the incredibly badass and sexually attractive, Red and Blue soldiers of Project Freelancer. PS: Suck our balls," Rock added before the connection dropped.

"...Did you really say that?" Roll giggled once the connection was dropped.

"What? I thought it'd be cool," Rock frowned.

"I might as well go make sure that those two meet up," Felix noted as he walked off, "Coming, hot-ass?"

"Oh, you just earned yourself a vivisection."

"Whoa," Felix chuckled before he ran off, Dr. Grey following with a scalpel in each hand.

"So what happens now?" Bass asked as he went into his body.

"Well, we've got about three days before our Loop ends, give or take a day," Tucker shrugged, "...Capture the Flag?"

"No," the Reds, Roll, Wash, Rock, Carolina, Bass, and York instantly replied.

"And this is your sister. Her name is Roll," were the words Roll Awoke to.

'Dad...' Roll thought with a smile forming on her lips, *'I really missed hearing that voice.'*

Roll sat up and blinked a few times. She saw Rock, who gave a small wink at her and earning a subtle nod from her, their father, and a young man in blue military uniform.

"I'll give you three some time to talk," Dr. Light informed as he walked out of the room.

"...I'd like to say in advance that I am sorry if Caboose ever shot you," was the first thing that came out of the man's mouth, causing both to look at him.

"Are you...?" Roll's eyes widened.

"My name is Leonard Church, or rather, Church Light this Loop," the man informed, "I'm also Epsilon, Delta, little Theta, Omega, and Sigma. But you guys can call me either 'The Alpha' or 'Church.'" he looked over at Rock, "How you feeling, kid?"

"Good. I... I don't remember a lot before my time on Chorus and hanging out with just Bass and Carolina, though," Rock admitted.

"Ah. Well, I got a call from your Admin before I came in here. Had to disguise it as a call from my commanding officer this Loop," Church informed, "Turns out that he and my Admin, whoever the guy or girl or it is, made a filter of sorts for people who end up as Epsilon. You don't remember the memories of Loopers who end up as the other AI." he then whispered, "You made sure to write down some good blackmail just in case something like this happened?" (27)

"Yep," Rock chuckled.

"Good," Church chuckled, "Epsilon has a large folder himself on embarrassing secrets other Loopers have when they manage to survive as me forgetting not to get close to him."

"What are you talking about?" Roll frowned.

"Nothing!" both replied, standing at attention.

"Wait, why did you do that?" Rock asked as he looked at Church.

"When your ex-girlfriend/AI Fragment can kick your ass in an argument, you learn to listen to women," Church informed, "Now then..." reaching into his Pocket, he took out a pair of badges shaped like the symbol for Alpha and the symbol for Epsilon, "In honor of you surviving a Loop as me and as Epsilon, I award you both the Alpha Emblem and the Epsilon Emblem respectively," he gave the badges to them and saluted them, "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Rock nodded.

"Wait... Are you replacing Blues?" Roll asked.

"Yeah. Unlike him, I went with the transplant of power sources," Church shrugged, "I really wanted to meet the two who are considered honorary little brother and little sister to everyone aside from Sarge."

"Sarge?"

"What does he see us as?"

"Honorary son and daughter," Church replied before he noticed how the two shuddered a bit, "Yeah...We did that too when he got drunk and admitted that he saw us as the sons and daughters... and Grif... that he always wanted after the war ends. But still..." he patted their shoulders, "What you two did was a good thing. You gave Caboose comfort that I might not always be there and that he can deal with it."

"He thinks I'm a female you," Roll deadpanned.

"Oh, he figured that out a few minutes after we talked once he Woke up a few Loops back," Church chuckled, "Now then, I believe a certain lady with killer broom skills is in need of some non-red clothes."

"You got that right," Roll frowned as she looked at her red dress before taking her Hogwarts wand out and tapped the red fabric, turning it into the same shade of blue she had worn in the RvB Loop.

"Okay... I was going to buy you some outfits and we'd go for a pretzel or two at the mall, but that works as well," Church shrugged.

"...I think I do remember one thing aside from my time on Chorus," Rock noted before smirking, "How good are you at building copies of those aliens from your Baseline?"

"I have some spares Lopez built," Church shrugged with a smirk, "They're all programmed in how to drive, rap, dance, and play basketball."

"...Awesome," Rock grinned. (28)

Roll rolled her eyes with a small smile. At least now she'd get to know this 'Church" everyone mentioned in the Loop. Looking down at her new medal, she made a mental note to get some polish for it. She was not going to forget that Loop, not for a long, *long* time.

Compiler's Commentary:

1) I'm trying to think of context where this sentence wouldn't sound disturbing and I'm not succeeding.

2) Get used to that feeling Roll. This branch is like that.

3) Pinkie Pie logic is one thing, but Caboose just flat hurts my brain.

4) Does anyone else need a flowchart yet?

5) Oh, *there's* a nasty fused variant Loop waiting to happen...

6) Do recall that Roll was originally a housekeeping model. Cleanliness is something she takes pride in.

7) She actually ups this to a hundred at some point according to a snip to be compiled later.

8) Zero was either very relieved or extremely paranoid that Loop.

9) Guinness Book of World Records notes a natural bra size equivalent to a 48V-cup bra (not manufactured anywhere). No, I kid you not. Also, Roll is politely not mentioning that her father makes her robo-bust adjustable when she's still a robot in those Loops.

10) Rock is *not* a fan of Jarate. Frankly, neither is anyone else who gets hit with it.

11) Please note that Rock isn't feeling quite himself due to some of the unique circumstances involved in replacing Epsilon, including but not limited to the very, *very* , clear memories of torture and all that. Kindly ignore any instances where he seems out of character as resulting from this state and enjoy the ride.

12) Does anyone other than me keep looking for Proto Man every time the Blues are mentioned in this?

13) Well, this went pear-shaped fast.

14) ...How do you even *pronounce* '0.o'?

15) GammaTron: SK. Simmons Kong! SK. Simmons Kong is here!

16) How the heck is there anything still intact about Grif's crotch at this point?

17) I don't even want to know...

18) To clarify: Bass is casual with swearing anywhere. It's Rock swearing that he's not used to.

19) GammaTron: You also develop a phobia to mannequins and things like mannequins.

20) If there's one big chink in Roll's armor it's that she doesn't take the loss of those she cares for well at all.

21) Bass's name is pronounced like 'base', not like the fish. Bass is not a fish. Wow it's been a long time since I thought of that particular fanfic...

22) Rock actually enjoyed being a Sylveon. It was dealing with Team Wily on a regular basis that he doesn't like being reminded about.

23) Well, it is when Red vs Blue physics is involved.

24) GammaTron: Yes, I went with the design for ZeroEXE. I just thought it'd be interesting for a later Loop if Roll were to ever meet the actual ZeroEXE to mistake him for Zero Dos Point 0.

25) RvB chemistry of course.

26) You only ask that now, Roll? Honestly, I thought RvB was 'What the Hell Just Happened?: The Web Series'.

27) Clarification reminder: Rock and Roll are Joint Anchors (i.e. not bound to each other) who can either serve the role of Anchor for an iteration. While they are often Awake together, they aren't always. Apparently Rock had a couple of Loops by himself after RvB before this one was arranged. I'm just going to guess that Heph and 'mystery RvB Admin' wanted to double-check that the Epsilon memory filter was working properly.

28) Not entirely sure what exactly this resulted in, but I'm told the music video was 'wicked sick'.

Mega Loops 17

Mega Loops 17

17.√-1 (Gamerex27)

Rock was no stranger to Loops where people replaced his friends, family, or even enemies. Eggman replacing Dr. Wily, Heimskr from the Elder Scrolls replacing Reverend Dark, Autochthon replacing Auto, Aigis replacing Roll...

But they had never been this...confusing. Until now.

"He's Albert Wily," One of the women said, grabbing the Unawake man by the arm.

"He's Booker DeWitt," said an identical woman in different clothing, grabbing him by the other arm.

"No," said the ex-Pinkerton agent, horrified realization dawning in his voice. "I'm *both* ."

And then the horde of identical women pushed Booker DeWitt beneath the river, holding him down in spite of his struggles. Eventually, bubbles stopped floating to the surface, and he ceased struggling. One by one, the Elizabeths faded from existence, fading out like a bad Photoshop effect. Eventually, all that was left in the baptism site was one final Elizabeth, collapsed into a quantum superposition, and two very, very confused robots.

"I...I..." Roll struggled to find the words, her vocal processor turning on and off as she tried to understand what she had just witnessed.

Rock was only slightly more eloquent. "What the *scrap* just happened?!"

Elizabeth sighed, trudging out of the stream and sitting on the edge of the water, her feet dangling into the river. "It took me a while to understand it too."

From her Subspace Pocket, she withdrew a complex chart. From what the Light siblings could tell, the lines represented different timelines, branching out from a single common point, labeled as "The Baptism".

"Basically," Elizabeth explained, "in one set of timelines, Booker refuses to get baptized, and spends a good chunk of his life wallowing in his own guilt. In another set, Booker takes the baptism, and thinks it absolves him of all his guilt in putting down the New York World Fair's robot rebellion."

According to Roll's Loop memories, the World Fairs kept going long past the point where they stopped in baseline, and expanded to include inventions such as the first primitive robots. When they began showing signs of sapience in their New York location, the Pinkerton Guard was called in to eliminate them.

"He then decides to build his own flying utopia to escape the "sins" of the people below. Usually, it's for religious reasons, but this time it was to make an industrial utopia where progress was the name of the game. Of course, enslaving and tormenting all the robots who lived there never stuck them as the least bit hypocritical."

"Did you *have* to kill him?" Rock frowned, clearly upset at this turn of events. "I always try to rescue Wily, no matter what he's done. Even though he was worse than I've ever seen this time–what with building millions of robotic slaves and making a whole religion that demonizes them–I try my best to give him a second chance. Are you sure there was no other way to stop him?"

"If there is, I haven't found it yet," Elizabeth replied. "Booker–the Awake one–and I have tried to find other ways. Chasing away or killing the preacher, using a Tear to bring in storms to disrupt the ceremony, sucking all the water out of the lake...Whatever we do, he

always finds another place to get baptized, and the split always happens. Constants and variables." She crossed her arms. "No matter what we try to change in the different timelines, Comstock always finds a way to get his baptism, or some other way to "cleanse" himself of his sins. The only way to stop it is to break the branching point, by killing him before he can make the choice."

"So, what happens to Columbia now?" Roll asked. "Now that Wily is gone, does that mean everything he did never happened?"

"For the most part. There are some variant timelines–Comstock, or this time, Wily, goes through something traumatic and goes back to being Booker again to escape his guilt, usually." Elizabeth looked behind the two robots, at something only she could see. "And that Wily is in another city right now." The transdimensional woman stood up, opening a rip in reality with a single gesture. "Which means right now, there's a little girl that needs saving, and a timeline we need to fulfill. If I don't make sure that... *that man* gets what he needs, things end even worse for Rapture. I'd ask if you want to come along. but something tells me you'd do more good back here."

Rock nodded. "Yeah. Someone's got to rebuild that city Columbia crashed in."

"And maybe those robots who survived the crash would listen to us better than the human law enforcement agencies," Roll added.

"Right, then." Elizabeth looked through the Tear. On the other end of the hole in space-time was an empty alleyway, a window overlooking the sea beyond, and a familiar robot wearing shades lying deactivated in the corner.

"So that's where he's been this whole Loop," Rock noted. "He should be fine on his own there. As long as you can turn him back on, I mean."

7.7.7 (continued - Hubris Plus)

Pitchblende Part 6: The Code From Out of Space

"Huh," Robo mused, tapping a latex coated finger against the glass sphere. They'd managed to convince him to get an upgrade after his arm had gotten blown off, complete with copy chip and mega buster. His long tapering arms made the device look more like a rifle or bazooka when deployed, but otherwise didn't change his design too much. He'd still flat out refused to start calling himself Mega Robo "Is the skull pattern naturally occurring, or did Wily add that?"

"Could you maybe *not* poke at the evil energy?" Roll groused.

"Okay, one: You guys aren't allowed to make fun of the term action scientist anymore. Evil energy is *much* sillier. And two: I'm a scientist, poking at weird things is part of the territory."

"Really? Because you mostly seem to shoot at it."

"Shooting is just poking at range," Robo defended. "Besides, I think I know what I'm doing with this one. It's reading almost exactly like an Odic perturbation I sometimes find in my office."

"You find *evil energy* just floating around your office?" Rock asked, blinking.

"Odic perturbation," he corrected. "The result of Thomas Edison accidentally scattering his consciousness across the planet during an attempt to harness the earth's Odic field and acquire immortality. I'm wondering if this stuff is the result of a similar attempt on a *cosmic* scale."

"Plausible," Rock stated after a moment, cupping his chin in thought. "Even Duo isn't sure where it actually comes from most Loops."

"Guys," Roll scolded. "World in jeopardy."

"Right, right, let's just move on so I can get back to overcharging the military for overpowered com units." He weathered their deadpan stares for a moment. "And stopping Wily. We should probably also stop Wily."

Rock and Roll stepped past one another, high fiving as they went and exchanging copy chip data. With a practiced motion, Rock continued on to bump Robo's fist... And they both froze.

"Infinity minus one error," Robo noted, staring down at his replacement arm. " *Horsefeathers* ." He pulled a plasma torch from his Pocket and swept it across his elbow until the limb came off and turned to Rock. "We need to move quick, before-"

"Too late," Rock groaned, clutching the sides of his head. "My copy chip is–UHG!–integrated. It's already in here."

"What's going on?!" Roll shouted, hovering just to one side. On the ground, Robo's arm sprouted a tentacle.

"The Shadow must have hitched a ride on the weapon data," Robo answered. "When we combined it..."

"Yeah, but he'll be fine, right? We've got the best firewalls ever conceived of. We're *occlumens* for Tesla's sake!" The pair put a great deal of effort into making it hard to get into their heads. With Wily's fondness for trojans, it was a requirement.

"And if it were trying to get at his mind, that would work," Robo said as he took a step back. Rock fell to his knees. "But it's just skipping that to get to the hardware. Direct physical control of peripheral circuitry."

"What do we do? How do we fix this?!"

Rock's fingers relaxed and slid away from his helmet, leaving behind dents. His head remained downcast.

"Same as always. We go in, we take it down." He flexed the fingers on his remaining hand.

"Roh," the Blue Bomber wheezed.

"How do you know that'll work? We're the last ones, after this there's–"

"BOOOOOOH!" The machine that had been Rock roared, throwing his head back. A narrow blue tongue lolled out of a too-wide mouth studded with mismatched teeth. His eyes had gone yellow with rectangular pupils.

"We try," Robo told her as he leaped back from a sickly purple ball of plasma. "Because we can't *not* ."

Roll looked between him and her transformed brother for a moment. It had been a long time since one of them had gone down when they were both Awake.

And she decided it would be a long time yet. She gave Robo a firm nod.

"Good. Now I just have to defeat Mega Man and claw open a portal through him and into an eldritch abomination." He turned to lead with his left side and held his remaining arm across his body. "One handed. This is gonna go great."

"Whiii-liii," The Shadow-Rock rasped. It offered them a toothy grin before leaping back and vanishing into a beam of teleportation.

"Oooor not. That's a new one."

"SPLAG!"

"Oh no," Robo noted as they turned to see the monstrosity that had grown out of his discarded arm. "This is *much* better."

The thing was ten feet tall and what had been his forearm had split into a long beak studded with teeth. Five spindly blue legs held the thing aloft. A single gigantic eye spun wildly in the center of the downward facing palm.

"Little help here?!" He called as he ducked a wild bite.

"Give me a minute!" Roll shouted back, one finger to the side of her head to signal she was making a call.

"You've got the B-Man," the other end answered.

"...B-Man? Really?"

"I'm... Just gonna go ahead and never use that again. Wait... Mega Woman?" Bass asked, "how did you get this frequency?"

"That's not important," she told him, peppering the monster with Buster fire. "Did my brother just teleport to your base?"

"Yeah, got 'im on the feeds now. He doesn't look so great."

"Okay, Bass, listen carefully." She took a deep breath. "I need you to stop Mega Man from reaching Wily. At all costs."

There was a long beat of silence over the line.

"I like this plan. I'm excited to be a part of it."

ELSEWHILE

Rock, Roll, Robo and Elec Man tumbled out of the rip in un-space, the hole full of reality snapping shut behind them. What they landed on was something of a mystery, as it was the exact same shade of perfect white that seemed to radiate from every cubic inch of the place.

"Dad?!" Roll shot up and looked frantically around the vacant expanse. There was nothing as far as the eye could see. "Where is he?"

"Where are *we* for that matter?" Elec Man asked as he picked himself up.

"Those questions are irrelevant for reasons you don't have the math to understand," Robo told them. He unslung the bag from his back and set it on the ground. Opening it up, he took out a heavy piece of machinery covered in dials, readouts, and loose cables. "They'll be even more irrelevant once we crack this sucker open."

"Is that a bomb?" Rock asked carefully. Robo had told them plenty of stories where the finale was 'and then there was an explosion, but I was the only one tough enough to live through it'.

"Kinda-sorta? It does interesting things to space that result in something very much like an explosion," he told them as he fiddled with a dial.

"Wanna tell me how many pieces I'll be in at the end of *this* adventure?" Elec Man groaned, head in his hands.

"I said *like* an explosion. This is the MK XII, it should drop us right back when and where we came from at very nearly the same velocity we left at."

"As opposed to..." Roll prompted.

"The MK II once punched me through a–"

"–Horrible gooey mess," an identical voice interrupted.

"That's somehow worse and better than I expected at the same time," Roll noted.

"I was going to say parking garage," Robo answered.

"I was talking about the giant hand monster," a second Robo said. "Did you *really* have to feed it crash bombs?"

The group whirled around to find a pair of robots climbing out of a heap of purplish slime.

"You wanted it to stop moving," the smaller robot answered, hand turning into a water nozzle and hosing them down. "I made it stop moving."

"Ummmmm..." Rock prompted.

"We're from the future," the notably lopsided Robo answered just as Roll finished clearing the gunk off her helmet.

She immediately found a pair of Mega Busters targeting her head.

"Actual future, actual future!" She shouted, throwing her hands up in front of her face.

Rock dropped his arm a fraction while Roll held hers steady. "How do we know–"

The Robo that had arrived with them slapped both their barrels down. "What did I *just* say about having a little dignity if you met yourselves?"

"Sorry," Roll said sheepishly, reforming her hand.

"Eh, not like I didn't do the same," her counterpart answered with a shrug.

"So," Elec Man began with a grin. "Just off-hand, how badly did you get disarmed?"

"You're hilarious. Hold that thought," the elder Robo stepped between Rock and Elec Man. "You're here, and you're *here* , so that means..." He plunged his arm into nothing and a moment later

dragged through another Robo in a flight suit, who was himself dragging through a second Mega Man.

"Oh, great," the electric master's grin faded and he threw his hands in the air. "Now there's *three* of him!"

"Is that the last of us," the youngest Rock asked. "Or is this going to get silly?"

The future copies of Rock and Roll exchanged glances before deadpanning "Yes."

"Right," the youngest Robo began. "I guess this means I can't pull off the detonation on my own?"

"Wily did something to its structure," the eldest agreed. "We need to do a complete recalibration."

"I'd say that's impossible, but–"

"It's Wily," all four Rock and Rolls chorused.

"And this time we don't have thirty years to take measurements," the flight suited Robo added. "So we'll need to see his equipment."

"Or, more accurately, *you* will," one arm pointed to the youngest iterations of Rock, Roll, and Robo present. "The rest of us will stay here and calibrate the bomb according to the readings you're going to take. If we time it right–"

"Which we will," Mega Woman Sr. assured them.

"–We'll set it off the instant you have the numbers."

"...What if you're early?" Rock asked. "Aren't paradoxes bad news?"

"They're also impossible," Robo told him. "At least for this. This isn't happening multiple times, it's one event from multiple perspectives."

"So where's this equipment?" The younger Roll asked. "Where's Wily holed up during all of this? Where's Dr Light?"

"Or are those questions still irrelevant?" Rock crossed his arms.

"They are," the flight suited Robo told them, waving for them to follow as he somehow stepped *around* the featureless expanse. "But they're irrelevant in useful ways."

Joining him, and losing sight of the others in the process, the youngest trio found themselves looking at more endless white, run through with hundreds of blue crags and tendrils. The Shadow's anatomy formed a surreal landscape, robots in various stages of infection marching through it. Up and down didn't seem to matter, the alien terrain twisting every which way and the machines moving along it with no regard for hypothetical gravity.

In the distance was a massive Skull Castle, the edifice's typical toothy maw replaced by a swarm of curling tentacles.

"You're going to need this," he went on, unbuckling his holster and handing it to his younger self.

"Don't you have those in your Pocket?" Roll asked, eying the snub nosed revolver.

"No pockets," Robo stated sternly as buckled the ammo belt. "This thing is trying to eat the universe."

"And subspace pockets would just be a snack for it," Rock finished, nodding to himself.

"Got it in one. That's how I lost the ZSAD Mk II, by the way."

"So now what?"

"Now," Robo finished checking his gun's chambers and snapped it shut again. "It's business as usual."

Rock had stopped struggling once he'd registered the teleport. He hadn't given up, but with his family out of danger he could afford to be patient and pick his moment. It had been a long time since anything had managed to forcibly override any of his processes, but he remembered the value of getting them to lower their guards.

Then again, he wasn't sure if the Shadow was smart enough to be tricked. Most of his senses were muffled, as though their wiring had been corroded, but the impressions he got were of a wild animal, leaping from target to target without strategy. Any damage was quickly filled in by the Shadow's own flesh, while his opponents found themselves smashed into walls or torn open by vicious claws. Rarely, it would remember he had weapons.

Further contemplation was set aside as his body was clotheslined, its mad dash turning into a wild tumble. He found his vision briefly restored as he turned to snarl at the interloper.

"Hey, Mega-Munchkin," Bass told him, leaning casually against the door frame. "Your sister said you'd be stopping by."

Silently, Rock wished his old rival luck.

"She says hi," he added, arm transforming and charging.

"Albert, please," Thomas Light implored his former colleague. He was sitting in the center of his hemispherical cage, trying to stay as far as possible from the slimy bars. "You can't possibly believe you can control this creature."

"We're scientists, Tom," Wily answered. His back was to the cage, instead watching the multitude of twisted screens that hovered above his console. "Impossibility is our birthright. To take our beliefs and make them reality. We believed in machines that could think and feel. In limitless energy. In the power to change the world. Why should we stop there?"

"Because we were meant to help the world. Not rule it."

"I used to believe that we were meant for something greater. That our genius was in some way a gift and an obligation, that I was meant to rule." He lifted a hand to his temple. "I now see that I was wrong."

"Thank goodness. Albert, let me out, we can still stop this, we can–"

Wily's laughter had an echoing, gurgling quality that froze the words in his throat.

"There is no meaning, Tom. No fate, no grand story. Things happen and we see the pattern we want. But there's only one pattern, stretching away in all directions for eternity, repeating in infinite but minor variation. And from here, I can almost see it. It's like... A song I've forgotten the words to." He let his arm drop. "Tell me. Do you ever get the feeling that all of this has happened before?"

"Albert, please. You need help."

"I! NEED! NOTHING!" Wily roared, whirling to face his rival. His right eye was bulging and yellow. A pulsing blue vein trailed away from it towards his scalp. "I have seen the beginning! I *am* the end! There is not a moment unaccounted for, nothing beyond *my* design! When this is over my victory will be total and my failures will have *never existed!* "

"And that... Should just about... Do it..." Robo said, carefully turning the last dial.

"So... What now?" Rock asked. The rest of them hadn't had much to do since their younger selves had gone off to assault Wily's fortress.

"Now we just have to wait for our chronometers to say it's boom time, right?" He asked, looking to his older self.

"Unacceptable!" Elec Man declared. "I didn't come along to sit on the sidelines. If there's nothing to do here, I'll go help the others." He took a few steps in the direction they'd gone before pausing and scratching his head. "Um. How does this work, exactly?" He stared at the stubbornly blank expanse.

"It doesn't," the eldest Robo answered, laying his hand on Elec's shoulder. "Welcome to the end of the chain. I get to see it all coming, but can't exactly change things. They go, we stay. That's just what happens."

"Ah, I see. Your hands are tied." Elec Man looked pointedly at the stump of Robo's other arm.

"You're a vindictive little–Down!" Robo shouted, hurling himself and Elec Man to the ground. The nothing in front of them had suddenly disgorged a horde of infected robots. Tentacles squirmed out or joins, their armor dotted with bubbling growths and bony plates. Joes stomped through on uneven limbs, followed by Mets that resembled squids beneath their helmets.

In seconds the region was full of uncoordinated fire. The infected units loosed shots seemingly at random, some dragging their guns from target to target with inevitable slowness while other jerked their weapons wildly, over-correcting on every shot.

Elec Man shot to his feet, laying down a wide field of electricity that slowed the mob while the others regrouped. Rock and Roll threw up barriers, soaking up fire as they positioned themselves to return the favor. Having abandoned their weapons, the two Robos waded in, throwing around their larger stature and heavy armor.

"Everyone alright?" Rock called out a few minutes later. The infected robots had been reduced to scrap and ooze, though a few industrious limbs were trying to crawl on their own.

"Disgusted but still standing," Roll reported. She looked briefly at her water nozzle before frowning and swapping it for a flamethrower and

sweeping it across the broken machines. "Fire is the ultimate cleanser."

"As if these things could lay a hand on me," Elec Man smirked, firing off a small bolt at a twitching limb.

"I can't even tell if that one was on purpose," the elder Robo noted.

"MRPH–Fine," his younger counterpart said, tearing a Met off his face. He gave it a few vicious stomps until the tentacles stopped moving. "Should have expected that. We'll have to watch out for–Applesauce," he interrupted himself and ran for the bomb.

The device had been hit by what looked to be over a dozen shots, clustered suspiciously well for the erratic firing pattern that had inflicted them. The scorched hole went clear through the middle. Robo knelt next to it and started frantically digging through the insides.

"No, no, *no!* We lost power and transmission. We've got *some* modulation left, but I wouldn't trust it." He grasped his head. "We didn't even bring our lightning guns in for spare parts..."

"…Just the way things happen, huh?" Elec Man asked, looking to the one armed robot. He received a solemn nod.

"You need a lightning gun?" He strode up to the bomb and held up a hand crawling with electrical sparks. "I'm the best ever built."

17.71 (OathToOblivion, with an add-on by me)

Mega Man was having a particularly tough time against this particular opponent. Rather than Bass, Wily had instead built this new robot called Wizard. Not only did he have a Dragon support unit that was giving Rush a particularly hard time, but he could change his attributes on the fly between Fire-based, Water-based, Wind-

based, and Earth-based. Just as he was starting to puzzle out a pattern, Wizard and Dragon stopped.

"Well, this is an interesting Loop to Wake up to," Wizard commented.

"I'll say. I'm getting some fresh air for a change," Dragon pointed out.

As they were talking, Mega Man lowered his Mega Buster. "You guys are Loopers then?" he asked.

The other two noticed him, before Wizard nodded. "That's right. Rockman, I presume?" he asked. At Mega Man's look of surprise, he elaborated. "I played your games back home. I also heard about what happened to you guys from one of the other Anchors in our branch."

Rock nodded. "Right then. Of course, it's Mega Man, not Rockman," he corrected.

"The international version, then?" Wizard mused, before holding his hand out. "Sohma Haruto, Kamen Rider Wizard. This here is my Co-Anchor, WizarDragon," he introduced.

"Rock Light, but you knew that already," Mega Man said in reply.

"So, what do you usually do right about now?" Dragon asked.

"Well, right now, I'm supposed to be fighting you two," the Blue Bomber pointed out. "You've taken Bass and Treble's places; that is, Forte and Gospel by the names you're familiar with."

"Ah. Well, I don't particularly feel like fighting," Haruto said. "How about we just claim that you opened our eyes to the truth, and we swore to fight against Wily with you?" he asked.

"Sounds like a plan to me, but be careful when fighting Wily. He's Dreaming, which means he might remember anything you do and use it in a later Loop, even if he doesn't consciously remember this Loop," Rock warned.

Dragon simulated raising an eyebrow by arching his head. "That seems pretty dangerous," he commented.

Rock shrugged. "Our Branch *is* pretty buggy."

"Well, no use standing around," Wizard decided, as he started walking towards the exit. The other two followed after. "Just checking: The abilities Wily made us with are all right, correct?"

"Oh, sure," Rock replied. "For one, there's no point trying to keep Wily from learning something he already knows. For another, while you were harder than most things he's built before you Woke Up, he's made more than a few more dangerous things. I know we sound overly cautious when we warn people about Wily's Dreaming, but his baseline ability leaves a *lot* of leeway."

17.Ω

Percy Jackson had to admit, having this particular automaton along for the quest to stop Gaea from waking up had been rather interesting so far. Some things had gone better, some had actually been harder, and a few things had gone wildly off course. But what he and the others were seeing right now, with Leo filming every second from multiple angles, was worth any hardship that might result.

The mortal-made automaton, known to friends as Rock and to most anyone else as Mega Man, was trouncing Nike/Victoria's Nikai, with the full intention of going after the conflicted winged goddess herself in the next few moments. Make that right now.

"Pull yourself together!" Rock yelled as the goddess flickered between her Greek Nike and the Roman Victoria aspects. "No one wins this way!"

"NO!" both halves shouted in stereo. "There must be a winner!" Nike screamed as she jabbed with her spear. "Victory or death!" Victoria yelled, trying to run Rock over with her chariot.

"Second place is the first loser!"

"No quarter! No surrender!"

"Winners gain glory!"

"Losers DIE!"

"The best reign!"

"The rest bow!"

"Will! You! SHUT! UP!" Rock yelled back as he vaulted over the chariot's horses, twisted around the spear, and *slapped* the goddess flat in the face. She was so stunned by the sheer audacity of the maneuver that she lost her balance and fell out of the chariot, goddess and automaton tumbling in the dirt as the horses dragged the chariot off into the distance.

"You..." the goddess of victory got to her feet, shifting between her aspects so rapidly that it hurt Percy to look at her, and lunged at her opponent. "You DARE?!"

Rock sidestepped the charge in a twisting pirouette that ended in a submission hold immobilizing both of Nike/Victoria's arms and her wings and pinning her to the ground.

"You think this is Nike versus Victoria, Greek versus Roman, but it's not. It's just *you* . A single competitor. There won't be a winner and a loser in the end, just you either having won or lost. And a goddess divided against herself *cannot* win. Whichever half of you comes out on top, *you lose* . Not just the fight, but half of your essence. Forever."

"NO!" Nike screamed. "Competition! Struggle! Glory!"

"Battle! Blood! Conquest!" Victoria argued back, struggling against the hold. "Victory or defeat!"

"Listen to yourselves!" Rock growled as he forced the goddess back down. "You're the same person! The same goddess no matter if you wear a Greek or Roman face! You can't fight me and yourself at the same time! There must be something you can agree upon!"

Percy watched as the goddess stilled and the flickering effect sped up until suddenly it stopped and was followed by a blast of force that flung Rock off and made Percy shield his eyes. When he looked again, the goddess of victory was getting to her feet, but she seemed different.

Her wings were a combination of white and gold feathers, she wore the sandals and laurel of an athlete as well as the armor of a soldier. This wasn't Nike or Victoria, but somehow both.

"You're right," she sneered as Rock got back to his feet. "Both parts of me can agree on something. How much we despise you for the persecution of our favorite son."

Rock raised an all-too-human eyebrow as he considered the goddess for a moment. "You're Dr. Wily's mom? That explains so much..."

17.2X (pandoraElf)

Zero stared in horror at what lay before him.

"What do you think, Zero?" Copy X said with a smug smile. "With this new program, my consciousness will be transplanted into all reploids!"

Copy X's smile grew even wider. "Just think. There will never be a Maverick again."

Zero could only stare in silence. Then he spoke.

"You... you're insane."

"No," said Copy X. "I'm right."

"No! You're not!" shouted Zero in a rage that surprised Copy X. "What you're doing right now... You're spitting in the face of every reploid that fought in the Maverick Wars."

"Even the Mavericks... even the mavericks that X and I fought were fighting because they believed what they were doing was right! Sigma didn't take away their free will, he converted them! That's what made it so hard to keep on taking them down! Because they still seemed human!"

"Human?" said Copy X, raising an eyebrow. "Please. Reploids aren't human in the slightest."

"And you're saying you are?" said Zero with barely contained anger.

"Hardly. I'm just the one reploid who figured out how to solve the problem forever."

"...doing this... what you're doing goes against the ideals of every person I've ever known!" Zero responded, his rage building once again. "Dr. Light... Dr. Cain... Ciel... X... Axl... Even my creator, the one who designed me to be a machine of destruction, would be horrified to see what you are doing now!"

"That's why..." Zero said, glaring at Copy X, "That's why... I am going to END YOU!"

17.12

"Dr. Light?" asked a military officer who had come up to the Light family after the dedication of the city by Mayor L. Dorado had dispersed. "Are you familiar with the Lanfront Ruins?"

"Not personally," Dr. Light admitted, "though I have heard much about them from one of my colleagues."

"Well..." the military officer hedged, "there's been a transmission coming from it recently and we wanted you to take a listen and see if you could make something of it. If necessary, we're prepared to arrange transport to the ruins themselves for a closer look."

"I will do what I can," Dr. Light tentatively agreed. "May we hear this transmission?"

"Of course," the officer stated as he took out a digital player and pushed a button. The voice that came out was a little... unexpected.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I am the king of kings! Look on my toys, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Rock suddenly had a sinking feeling.

Rock had insisted that only he and Roll be taken to the ruins to investigate, and Roll had gone along with it after he'd promised to explain once they got there.

Landing at the Lanfront ruins had occurred with no issue. There was no EM field, no hostile robots, no dangerous anything that Rock or Roll tended to encounter in any Loop where they had cause to come here. The only things there were little green Mets in holiday hats scurrying around with what looked like children's toys or things to make them, and those simply paid Rock and Roll no more heed than they needed to move around the two larger robots. Getting to the temple chamber where an ancient alien supercomputer had buried itself more times than either cared to recall happened without incident.

The orb in the center of the temple was not the one that was usually there. For one, it was white instead of black. For another, it was apparently surrounded by jingling golden bells instead of a lethal forcefield. And finally, instead of an eye-like design that glowed, there was an actual *eye* with red sclera, a green iris, and a typical black pupil.

"That is *not* Ra Moon," Roll observed.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!" the orb chuckled at them in a friendly manner. "Welcome, children! Welcome! What would good little robots such as you like for Christmas?"

Rock sighed wearily. "Roll, meet Santa Claus. I met him during a Loop in the Cookieverse. One of the most insane corners of the multiverse."

Roll blinked and looked at the jolly alien eldritch supercomputer replacing their usual genocidal alien eldritch supercomputer, then turned to look at her brother. "Isn't Santa supposed to be, I don't know, a jolly old elf or something?"

"Where do you think the term 'eldritch' originated, sis?"

17.3

Axl was fairly new to this looping business, all things considered. He'd only begun recently for one, and for another he often wasn't even built until the Maverick Wars were well underway. That said, he'd lived through many fights against all manner of Mavericks, armies of mechaniloids, murderous cyborgs, human terrorists, insane pokemon, titanic digimon, sapient viruses, undead madmen, more than a few other things that would make the list drag on, and in general been reasonably certain that there was really nothing left that could surprise him.

"I'm sorry Commander X, could you repeat that?"

"I said that the Gummi Mafia has been mobilizing again recently."

His mistake, but the poor kid would learn eventually.

"My sincerest apologies; I think there's something wrong with my audio receptors, X. I'll go get them checked out immediately."

"Stay right there, kiddo," X smirked. "You probably heard just fine. This group is a new thing this Loop, but they've been around since before the Hunters were even formed and were the biggest, most organized, and most dangerous force of Mavericks before Sigma went nuts. Gave even him a great deal of trouble for a long while, especially with their penchant for using non-standard materials for their armor."

"What kind of non-standard materials?"

"There's a reason they're called the *Gummi* Mafia, Axl," X grinned. "And in case that wasn't enough of a hint, they tend to call their territory 'Candy Land'."

"...You *cannot* be serious..."

"Wish I wasn't, Axl," X's face suddenly turned stern. "Their armor may not be super-durable but it's odd and elastic enough that it changes how effective most weapons are, and that throws off the average hunter. Plus, while most of the members are weak, they're very well organized and aren't afraid to mob the opposition or take cheap shots, and they *love* ambushes. If you want, I could get Zero in here and let him rant and rave about them for the next hour and a half."

"Ah... no thank you..." Axl sweatdropped. "So you want me to go after them?"

"Not alone," X replied. "As it happens, there's a civilian specialist who has a great deal of experience dealing with this group after a couple of members kidnapped him for their underground fighting ring. He's one of the few people they're genuinely scared o–"

X was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"That's probably him now," X nodded. "Why don't you let him in?"

Axl shrugged and walked over to open the door and found himself staring at a massive set of bare pectoral muscles covered with sparse hair. Looking up, he saw a stern face behind a luchador mask styled after a buffalo, complete with small horns. A glance down confirmed his suspicions that the man, who had to have over half his body mass in his chest muscles, was only wearing a pair of brown wrestling briefs and a pair of brown shoes.

'What in...?' Axl blinked.

"Axl, meet Burrito Bison."

"X," Zero glared as he stormed into his friend's office, "for the *last time* I refuse to deal with that ridiculous group of criminals when there are plenty of capable hunters that are more than well-equipped to handle them. I don't care that you're technically my superior, and I *really* don't care if that luchador's technique works, I'm *not* doing that again."

"I know," X grinned cheekily back at his friend. "That's why I got Axl to do it."

Zero blinked repeatedly as the impressive head of indignation he'd worked himself into sputtered and died.

"Wanna watch?" X grinned, producing a bowl of something that looked remarkably like popcorn. Zero still found it amazing that X's

older sister had invented the stuff, even if she was still stuck on a good name for it.

"...Oh, alright." Zero sighed and walked over to where he'd have a good view of the observation screen on X's desk. "You are a terrible influence on me, you know that, right? How'd you get Axl to agree to this anyway?"

"Simple, I did my best impression of you."

"Poor kid doesn't know what he's in for," Zero took a handful of the robo-snack food.

"It really isn't as bad as you make it out to be."

"Look, just because *you* enjoyed hurtling through the air like some demented super ball fired from a giant slingshot doesn't mean the rest of us find it amusing."

---

17. Twitch (DrTempo)

Ash Ketchum (wearing the outfit Red was known to wear), Phoenix Wright, Little Mac, Scorpion, Bowser, Proto Man (wearing what looked like a professional wrestling championship belt) and Ganondorf looked around as they all Awoke. Scorpion blinked, saying "Where in the Netherrealm are we? And why does everything look so..odd?"

Phoenix chimed in with, "I guess you have been Looping for just a short while, Scorpion?" Said ninja nodded. "I'm sure Ash here can tell you." Ash said nothing. Bowser facepalmed. "You can stop being in character, Ash."

Scorpion, utterly confused, said, "In character?"

Little Mac, having gotten a drink, smiled. "We're in a Video Game Championship Wrestling Loop. It's an interesting Fused Loop where we're all part of a pro wrestling company. Unlike other such companies, we fight for real. We can't use our powers when fights break out, though. There are cases where some of our powers can be used out of the ring, but very rarely. Also, the place is a bit glitchy. I've seen things like people teleporting from one place to another, for one."

Ganondorf laughed. "These Loops are run, admittedly. The lawyer over there once had 9 singles matches wins in a row. And the Pokemon Trainer held the midcard title for a good while even."

Proto Man then said, "Our match is going to happen tonight, Scorpion..and it's for the VGCW Championship. Good luck out there."

Scorpion nodded. "Same to you."

And so the Loop went on...

17.8

"What are you doing Ciel?" Zero asked the leader of the resistance. Said leader was currently placing a silver dollar (minted with X's face on it for reasons Zero actively avoided learning) into a small tin (apparently made of tin no less) that was placed under... Well, Zero had no idea. Knowing how Ciel got in her more mad-sciency moments, it could be anything.

"Shh..." the teen girl hushed him, not taking her eyes off her work. "I recently uncovered an ancient alchemical scroll that I just had to try... All you need is a silver dollar, a tin... or some tin I wasn't sure so I did it both ways... and SCIENCE!"

Ciel threw a needlessly large switch causing bizarre energies to course from the machine and through the materials.

"Um... okay..." Zero hesitated when the freaky light show died down. "And that makes... what?"

"This!" Ciel hefted a circular disc that had replaced the silver dollar and tin over her head. It had a smaller circle cut out and the side facing Zero shimmered with rainbow colors along the radial. It took him a moment to realize the object was an old style CD.

"A CD?"

"Not just any CD!" Ciel declared, turning the disc so Zero could see an image of Ciel herself holding a microphone and wearing an outfit that wouldn't be out of place on a pop idol. "A Greatest Hits CD!"

Zero just sweatdropped. *'And to think... this is what she's like* not *looping...'*

17.A (Scorntex)

"Hello, my name's Sigma."

"Hello Sigma."

"... it's been three months since I last attempted to wipe out humanity, and was foiled by X! But I will have my revenge! EVOLUTION REQUIRES SACRIFICE! HOW CAN HE NOT UNDERSTAND? BUT I SHALL RETURN, STRONGER, I-"

" *Sigma!* What have I told you before?"

"No evil ranting. I–Sorry..."

"That's alright, Sigma. Perhaps it would be best if you just sat down now."

"Yes, Miss Iris..."

"Does anyone else have something they'd like to share? Vile? You've been very quiet tonight."

"I don't got nothing to say."

"Now, Vile, you remember what we talked about last week. It's important to share with the group."

"Don't even see why I'm even here. I ain't got no problem. Stupid Zero and X dragged me to this cornball cr–"

"Vile..."

"What? It is! Reploids talkin' about their feelings. Load'a bull..."

---

17. OMGWTFBBQ!

"Behold!" Dr. Wily cackled. "The most powerful Robot Master to ever exist! All the world must tremble before... THE GUY!"

Rock and Roll didn't sweat. However, after going through Wily's latest death-trap-happy fortress, they were doing a very good impression of it.

"BWAHAHAHAHA! It's over you two! I've won! There is no way you can defeat... THE GUY!"

All of a sudden, a hail of bullets hit Dr. Wily's latest creation, unfortunately not destroying it but nonetheless inflicting harm, as a new figure dropped into the room.

"Better re-check the patent old man," the youthful figure said as he brandished his gun. " *I'm* The Guy. Your little tinker-toy there wants to be The Guy, then he's gonna have to take the title from me first."

"Want some help?" Rock and Roll asked in unison.

The figure who called himself The Guy blinked in surprise and considered the two. "Sure, why not? It'll be a nice change of pace to have allies for once."

17.√-1) This isn't the Megaverse being glitchy. This is Bioshock being Bioshock.

7.7.7 continued) Hubris Plus: This isn't late. That's just an illusion caused by time-like curves.

17.71) OathToOblivion: Forgot to mention; Haruto's Copied Master Weapon as Wizard is his Rider Kick, Strike Wizard. This can come in any of the elements he can use.

17.Ω) Well, for this Loop at least she is. And this is Percy Jackson-verse Nike, not Admin!Nike.

17.2X) Copy X is obliviously pressing Zero's berserk button here. I'd feel sorry for him, but I'm too busy diving for cover.

17.12) So. I play Cookie Clicker. It… doesn't actually have native loopers (thank goodness). Eldritch Santa is just good-natured enough to go along with things. Santa's nemeses are the Grandmatriarchs who threaten his home universe with the Grandmapocalypse. He combats them by running them over with his reindeer. (I am totally making most of this up)

17.3) One weekend a while back, I discovered the Burrito Bison games and the damn gummi bears stole my free time. But Burrito Bison got it back for me.

17. Twitch) Based off the popular Twitch show, Video Game Championship Wrestling.

17.8) Was introduced to another random generator site. This one with a random alchemy generator. Tried it out and got Tin + Silver Dollar + SCIENCE! = Greatest Hits CD.

17.A) Mavericks Anonymous.

17. OMGWTFBBQ!) Meet The Guy. Formerly known as The Kid. He wanted to be The Guy, so he beat The Guy. And after trillions of attempts to make it happen (via what was essentially a blind no-death run on impossible difficulty), his universe started looping.

"–and it wasn't until a few Loops later that I learned the Equestria terminal wasn't the only place where Zeus tried to hide his porn stash. How about you guys?" Ranma asked. "What was the worst Loop you ever had?"

"Roll," Rock turned to his sister, "you tell it. I can't do the voice properly."

"Alright," Roll grimaced. "But you owe me."

Roll turned to the rest of the group with a grave expression on her face.

"We were in what seemed to be a standard Trek Loop when, about the time the Borg usually show up, we encounter what must be the most messed-up spaceship ever constructed. Like someone took a school campus, scaled it up to the size of a large city, and then folded it into some kindergartner's idea of a three-dimensional object. It immediately hails us and we hear this:"

Roll closed her eyes for a moment and then; in the most cutesy, saccharine monotone; said...

"We are Eiken. All your fanservice are belong to us. You will join our clubs. Resistance is futile."

-) Ouch.

Mega Sonic Part 6

Mega Sonic: Part 6

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!" the enthusiastic voice of Leonard Dorado (0) echoed across the courtyard of Soleanna. "It is time once again for the greatest competition in the greatest of sports! The third annual EX WORLD GRAND PRIX! Are you ready?!"

The cheers could have likely been heard from outside the city limits, but that wasn't enough for the energetic mayor of Monopole and official announcer of the EX Racing League. No, he wanted to see if this crowd could be heard from space.

"I said ARE! YOU! READY?!"

It may not have been heard from space, but it the resulting cheer did register on a few local Richter scales.

"Then it is time to introduce this year's racing teams! First up, the reigning champions, the masters of the air, the BABYLON ROGUES!"

The cheers reached fever pitch as Jet, Wave, and Storm zoomed out towards the starting line set just below the royal balcony. The cheers continued as Leonard Dorado introduced other racers; including previous favorites like Team Sonic, the Freedom Fighters, Team Acorn, the Chaotix, Team Light, Team Dark, as well as numerous others from around the world who had only recently taken up the sport. It was easily the largest field yet seen as the widely grinning man wound the crowd up more and more with each team introduced.

"And last, but certainly not least, the team representing your hosting city of Soleanna, the Guardians of Soleanna! The time-traveling psychokinetic hero, SILVER!"

A silver-furred figure jumped onto the railing while holding an Extreme Gear board and was easily recognized as Silver the Hedgehog before he jumped off, twisting in acrobatic flips before landing his board on a cushion of air right at the starting line.

"The super robot from the future, QUINT!"

A green armored figure in blue shades catapulted over the railing while riding an angry-looking jackhammer. As he fell, the jackhammer twisted and reformed into a board-type Extreme Gear until he too landed on a cushion of air right next to Silver.

"And finally, the protector of Soleanna herself! Her Royal Highness: PRINCESS ELISE DE SOLEANNA!" (1)

The regal figure of the princess, clad in a splendid dress with a form-fitting bodice, strode calmly to the railing. Where she promptly tore off the dress's skirts to reveal that she was really wearing a form-fitting racing suit before jumping over the railing and performing her own acrobatic stunts to the amazed silence of the crowd and landing between her teammates with just as much skill as either of them had displayed.

The silence lasted for three beats before the crowd went completely nuts.

"Hey Jet, how's it going?" Sonic greeted. "Tense race today, huh?"

"To be expected with a Chaos Emerald as part of the grand prize," Jet shrugged indifferently.

"Yeah, about that, you see–"

"You want it to use against Eggman," Jet finished the thought and his face split into a wicked grin. "Don't worry. When the Babylon Rogues win the EX Grand Prix for the third year in a row, we'll be happy to sell it to you for a *fair* price."

"Yeah, that's *if* you win," Sonic returned his own cocky grin, his face inches away from Jet's own smug mug.

"You know, I always thought that Wily patterned my own ruthlessness after your sister's," Quint stated as he buffed some scratches out of Sakugarne from that day's race, "but now I wonder if he didn't give me yours as well."

"Um..." Rock blinked in confusion as he paused in buffing out the scratches Rush's armor had gained from his Extreme Gear form in the same race. "I'm sorry, but... what are you talking about?"

"Don't give me that," Quint gazed back levelly. "I saw how you raced today. For someone constantly on the 'top ten nicest guys in the world' list, you are quite brutal on the track." (2)

"Well, it helps that everyone is wearing those inertial dampening belts and headgear," Rock rubbed his head sheepishly. Sure, the things weren't perfect and a crash would still leave most people pretty banged up, but odds were good that you'd still walk away from most crashes under your own power. And that was without the complementary inertial nets set up along all of the official race tracks to further reduce injury. There hadn't yet been a fatality or even permanent injury with both safety systems involved and working properly.

"And your collisions on the track often throw other racers towards where the track's own inertial nets are strongest. Not only further preventing injury, but also robbing them of much of their speed."

"Well, that's a bonus, sure, but–"

"You want to win," Quint interrupted. It wasn't a question.

"Er..."

"It is a competition where lives are not on the line," Quint's mouth slowly grew into a knowing grin. "You can afford to lose, something I suspect you savor, but you still desire to win."

"Well..."

"It's a problem. You solve problems," Quint stood up and propped Sakugarne upright, holding it in place with one foot on a foothold and an arm slung across the handles. "That's where I get it from. You see, I was made to solve problems too."

Rock blinked and stood himself, holding out a hand to keep the now-growling Rush calm.

"I just don't feel any need to be *nice* about it." (3)

Rock stared at his future double for a long moment before stepping forward and extending his hand. After a moment of consideration, Quint took the hand and shook it.

"I'll see you on the track tomorrow," Rock smiled.

"Pray it's before I see you," Quint grinned back.

"Any idea why Rouge wanted to meet with you down here?" Bass asked as he followed Shadow down the hall, Treble trailing close behind. The only thing in this direction was some hot spring or something.

"None at all," Shadow replied with a shrug. "I don't know why she couldn't just tell me back in our hotel after–wait, do you hear something?"

The two exchanged a look before edging up to the corner of a doorway and listening around it.

"–you seriously asked him to come here to see if he'd walk in on you?" the voice of Sally Acorn asked incredulously. (4)

"Oh, like you haven't thought of doing the same with your beau, Sally-girl," the voice of Bunnie Rabbot teased.

"I can attest that she has, on several occasions, the most recent being–"

" *NICOLE!* "

"Oh, my, that sounds positively scandalous!" Elise's gasp of affront was ruined by her giggles.

"I'll have to remember to try that on Knuckles sometime..." another voice that was barely recognizable, that girl echidna with the Chaotix, added.

"You do that," Rouge's voice answered with an audible smirk. "Though you girls might want to hide yourselves. He'll be here any moment."

Bass and Shadow blinked as the group devolved into more giggling. Bass turned to his companion to see the ultimate lifeform frozen in red-faced shock and couldn't hold it in anymore.

The sound of loud guffaws and barks echoed through the hall, punctuated by furious cries to stop as Shadow chased his teammate and his robot canine angrily away from the hot spring entrance.

"Blaze?" Silver blinked at the sight of his friend from another dimension. "I didn't realize you were here."

"Well, Marine wanted to come visit you and Quint," Blaze explained, though there seemed to be no sign of the Unawake raccoon captain. She was likely off hyperactively taking in the sights and harassing vendors. "We'd have entered, but..."

"You don't have a third."

"Not without you at least," Blaze nodded with a slight smile, referring to the usual team she and he formed for such events. "Pity, but you should spend this Loop with your current friends. I'm glad to see you kept up ties with Elise actually."

"Quint's idea," Silver shrugged. "Wanted a base of operations that neither Dr. Light nor Dr. Wily had direct involvement in. One question though, what are you going to do if Marine wants to take an Extreme Gear back with her?"

"Buy her one for each day of the week," Blaze smirked back.

"Each day of... Oh no... You already bought them for her, didn't you?"

"WAHOOOOO!" a screaming blur that sounded like a dopplered Marine was the only warning for everyone in the area to duck down as a blur buzzed straight over their heads.

"Look, sheila, I said I wa–"

"And another thing!" the small rabbit girl, shorter than the raccoon girl she was berating if you didn't count the ears, with the angry chao scolded, "You should never race around where others could get hurt! It's rude and mean and dangerous and you should feel ashamed of yourself!"

"Here they come into the home stretch folks! Team Sonic and the Babylon Rogues are tied for first in the rankings and their leaders are neck and neck for the final goal! It's gonna be a close race, but what's this?" Leonard Dorado cut off commentary as he spotted something further down the track. "The Guardians of Soleanna are coming up from behind with Quint in the lead while Silver and Princess Elise ride his wake! What could they be planning?"

As he commented, Silver and Quint rebuffed some attempts by other racers to knock them off balance as they held a steady pace. If one looked closely, they would see that Quint was putting out the most thrust from his lead position while Silver behind him, and Elise behind Silver, were using the wake to charge up a boost.

Suddenly Quint whipped to the side, allowing Silver to boost past with Elise riding his wake. They gained on Sonic and Jet before Silver performed the same whipping motion to allow Elise to boost ahead. With her riding the accelerated wake prior to boosting, she rocketed forth at speeds beyond a normal boost and plowed straight through the tiny space between the rival racers, sending them both careening to the side from the lightest of bumps while Princess Elise rocketed through the finish line.

Behind her, Silver sailed through the finish line to loud cheers while Quint came with the main pack of racers, shoving back and forth with the members of Team Light, as they zoomed past a recovering Sonic and Jet.

"I don't believe it! What an upset! With a last-second strategy, the Guardians of Soleanna have taken first in the race! In fact, and I'll have to wait for the final score, I think they may have all placed high enough to win the entire Prix!"

The crowd quieted down as the rest of the racers crossed the finish line and the final tally was made. Each team in the race had their points added up, and it seemed someone was very deliberately saving the Guardians of Soleanna for last to ramp up the tension.

As Team Light's points came in and moved them *just* ahead of both Team Sonic and the Babylon Rogues, the crowd held its collective breath. The points came in and...

"The Guardians of Soleanna have won the third annual EX World Grand Prix BY A SINGLE POINT!" (5)

"Thank you for coming to see me," Princess Elise de Soleanna greeted her guests. Outside, the sounds of merriment continued as they had since the explosion of cheers the race's results had produced. The race had finished mid-afternoon. It was currently around midnight and the festivities showed no signs of slowing down.

"I'm always glad to come see a friend," Rock smiled alongside his sister and the Freedom Fighters (no longer divided into racing teams). "Especially after they pull off a stunt like that. That was amazing!"

"I'm just sorry I didn't get to see spiny's face when it happened," Quint casually leaned on Sakugarne while shooting a grumbling Sonic a triumphant smirk.

"A couple of friends of mine had cameras and managed to catch the moment," Silver chuckled and pulled out a perfectly timed photograph that showed Princess Elise on her Extreme Gear bursting through the middle of Sonic and Jet, as well as the comically surprised faces on the two.

"Give me that!" Sonic tried to dash forwards, only to be halted in the air by a psychokinetic field inches away from his target.

"Don't think so," Silver smirked, not letting the blue blur down. "Besides, my friend has the negatives and she's getting posters made right now. Mayor Dorado's already ordered a bunch for next year's promotional campaign.

"Oh, she's taking orders?" Sally raised an eyebrow. "Could you let her know the Freedom Fighters would like a few?"

"Of course."

"Great, just laugh it up why don't you?" Sonic groused.

"Oh, let it go 'little blue'," Rock grinned as Silver finally set the speedster down. "Elise earned it. She's come a long way since we gave her lessons."

"Thank you, Rock," Elise smiled. "Still, that is not why I have asked you here."

The princess of Soleanna gestured and one of the castle's staff brought a pillow over. A pillow on which rested the white Chaos Emerald, part of the race's grand prize.

"I understand that you are gathering these for an assault on Dr. Eggman," Elise continued.

"We are," Sally replied, now all business. "We have intel that he is alive and is recuperating. We intend to take out him and his main force using the Chaos Emeralds as insurance."

"Then I would like you to have this, with my thanks."

"Princess, we couldn–" Rock tried to protest.

"You can, and you will," Elise insisted regally. "You are my friends and I am pleased to offer my assistance in this. To tell the truth, a part of me feels I owe you far more than I can ever repay. So take it with my blessing. And... *ahem* give Eggman's posterior a kick for me, would you?"

"I think we can manage that," Sonic grinned.

"So the white Chaos Emerald is now in the hands of the Freedom Fighters," the G.U.N. commander mused. "And given reports we've received regarding an incident involving Tails of the Freedom Fighters, the Mega Woman, and a group calling themselves the Battle Bird Armada, that makes two in their possession. The red and the white. I suppose that's at least better than them being in the hands of Dr. Eggman or someone else like him." (6)

"Like pops and his latest 'hush-hush' project," Bass snorted, causing all eyes to look in his direction. "What? Pops is making yet another set of robot masters. Which means that *someone's* going to end up fighting and trashing them. And probably his shiny new amusement park along the way."

"He's got a point," Shadow shrugged. "Even if he's contracting with G.U.N. lately, his track record is... predictable."

"Be that as it may," the commander sighed, "your current priority is locating and securing one or more of the Chaos Emeralds before anyone else can."

"Well then," Rouge smirked and pulled a flyer from... well, somewhere that no one else could reach into without being accused of impure motives (7), "it's a good thing I have a lead."

She unrolled the flyer and showed everyone at the table.

"A poker tournament in Casinopolis?" Sally asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Indeed, mah princess," Antione grinned. "And part of ze grand prize eez ze purple Chaos Emerahld."

"And you think you can win it, Ant?" Sonic raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Oh, sugah-Twan's *good* , trust me," Bunnie giggled.

"Not that I don't believe you, Bunnie, but since when does Antoine play poker?"

"Since *ahem*," Antoine checked where the Unawake Cream was sitting, suggesting that what he was about to say was edited for the benefit of younger ears, "mah lapin and I decided to add ze little spice to our mahrriage..."

Cream looked confused as to what in the world poker, spices, and being married had to do with each other, but the older members understood and blushed awkwardly.

'Strip poker...' was the simultaneous realization.

"And Ah've been having to take a little ol' handicap lately," Bunnie admitted with a saucy wink in her husband's direction.

"What kind of handicap?" Sally asked despite part of her mind yelling that she'd probably rather not know.

"Tha kind a gal gets from being Jessica Rabbit's sister fer a Loop..." Bunnie cooed.

"Who and what?" the Unawake Amy asked.

"We'll explain later," Sally waved off the question. "Mind showing us what you mean?"

"Alright, Sally-girl," Bunnie shot the princess a teasing look, "but rememba', ya *asked* for it."

And with that, Bunnie *changed* . She was still Bunnie, still the cybernetic lapine they were all used to, but her waist was just a little thinner, her hips a bit wider, and her bust... *noticeably* larger. And her face and body language alike looked like 'sultry' was their default mood. She was no longer the southern belle beauty, but a bonafide six-star knockout on a five-star scale.

The only face that wasn't sporting a blush was Cream's, and even the young girl looked star-struck. Heck, even NICOLE seemed to be blushing at the sight.

"Wow... You're so pretty Mrs. D'Coolette!" Cream all but squealed.

"Buh... wha...?" Amy tried to find her voice.

"Took the words right out of my mouth..." Tails muttered past his glazed expression.

"Hey guys, what's–whoa..." Rock paused on entering to stare himself.

"Dang, Bunnie," Roll whistled. "Barbie just called to say you make her feel inadequate."

"Oh, but that's not all!" Bunnie grinned playfully and closed her eyes in concentration.

"Um..." Rotor attempted after several seconds had passed. "What are...?"

"Wait for eet," Antoine tsked with a knowing smile.

Several more seconds passed before there was a shift in the air, and suddenly there was a second Bunnie that was a perfect mirror image of the first, noticeable by how her cybernetic arm was on the opposite side. (8)

"Wait..." Sonic managed to shake himself back to something resembling coherence. "You mean to say that Antoine plays against *two* of you looking like *that* and *wins?!* "

"Yep," the original Bunnie giggled and molded herself to her husband's side in a way that sparked a new round of blushing amongst most of the people in the room.

"Beats our pants off all tha time," the duplicate replied in a tone that made it clear the phrase was meant literally as she mirrored the actions of the original on Antoine's other side.

"Um... what are you all talking about anyway?" Rock asked in confusion.

"Poker tournament," NICOLE used her solid hologram form to hold up the relevant flyer.

"Neat," Roll smiled.

" *Thank* you for giving me an excuse to bail on that giant awkward moment," Sonic finally said as he and Rock approached the Pumpkin Hill Zone. "I'm not sure how long I could have lasted before I needed more than a cold shower to calm down. Green shooting star touching down in ghost central followed by a massive surge in haunting was the perfect reason to get the heck out of there."

"Eh, it's a legitimate, if flimsy, lead on a Chaos Emerald," Rock shrugged. "Still, we didn't need to run off right that second."

"Yeah, right. *You* saw how Bunnie looked... And acted..." Sonic blushed and tried to shake off thoughts of Sally, or indeed any other girl, looking and acting like that around him. He'd need more than a cold shower if *that* train of thought was allowed to keep running.

"I'm a robot," Rock replied evenly. "Even if I can recognize that someone is highly attractive by societal norms and react in stereotypically appropriate ways, I'm asexual by default."

"Uh-huh..." Sonic gave his bro a skeptical look. "And how do you explain your sister? When we left it looked like she and Bunnie were exchanging notes."

"Roll's been fascinated by the concept of romance and anything even tangentially related to it since our baseline."

"Poor Bass..."

"Actually, Bass is an oddity among robots. Many of the base desires that biological lifeforms naturally deal with are only conceptually understood and mimicked by our emotional processors, but Bass seems to actually *have* them."

"So... what? Bass has robotic hormones or something?"

"That's my best guess."

"Man, you guys are weird."

"And you guys aren't?"

"Touche..."

"Pity you didn't take off when Sonic did. You two could have shared that cold shower."

" *NICOLE!* " Sally hissed under her breath as she dialed up a connection on Sky Patrol's main communications array. "This isn't the time!"

"If you'd rather wait until there are others who can share in this conversation..."

"No! Walkers, but I would love to switch places and see you embarrassed for a change!"

"...Interesting..." NICOLE mused. "That sounded like you were offering to share Sonic with me."

"What?! No! I was offering nothing of the sor–"

"I'm sorry, should I call back?" a voice from the communications array interrupted.

"No!" Sally denied frantically. "I'm perfectly fine with now! Nothing else going on! How about you, Shade?"

"I'm wondering why you're blushing and NICOLE looks half a second from laughing her holographic tail off," the echidna in a stereotypical form-fitting spy bodysuit answered in amusement. "But I suppose I can let that mystery slide."

"Oh, thank goodness."

"Now, princess, what can the Chaotix Detective Agency do for you today?"

"We have a possible lead on a Chaos Emerald I'd like you to investigate for us. A portal to a Special Zone has been detected that shows trace amounts of Chaos Energy that indicate the presence of a Chaos Emerald within the zone itself. I'd like you to investigate and, if feasible, retrieve the emerald for us. I'm forwarding payment details now."

"A pleasure doing business with you, princess."

"Ah, Casinopolis!" Rouge spread her arms and basked in the glittering neon ambiance of the gambling center of the planet. "Home of luck, fortune, excitement, millions of suckers just waiting to be parted from their cash, the world poker championship, and one one shining Chaos Emerald just waiting to be given a nice new home! Isn't that right, Shadow?"

There was no reply from Rouge's less-than-enthusiastic companion for this mission.

"I said, 'isn't that right, Shadow?'," Rouge repeated, her mind reluctant to change gears from basking in the ambiance of one of her favorite places on Mobius.

Still no response. He was going to make her look, wasn't he?

Rouge sighed and turned towards her companion. "Shadow, are you even listening to me?"

Shadow was right where he was supposed to be, but looking blankly off into the distance. Come to think of it, there were a bunch of people staring in the same direction.

"Shadow!"

"Huh?" the dark hedgehog shook himself to awareness. "What? Sorry, I was... distracted."

"By what?" Rouge demanded before looking in the direction Shadow had been focused on, and froze.

Some part of her mind registered the presence of that swordsman from the Freedom Fighters. The rest of it however was focused on what appeared to be some super pinup version of Bunnie Rabbot clinging to the swordsman's arm. And a mirror super pinup Bunnie clinging to his other arm. Both of them with with figures that Rouge would have happily–

"–ouge!" Shadow's hiss cut into her thoughts and the super spy bat shook her head clear. "They're coming this way!"

"Right..." Rouge forced herself to focus. And remember that she was supposed to be straight. *'Well, except for the occasional Loop where–FOCUS!'* "Sorry, I was... distracted."

"I'll bet," Shadow's voice sounded way too amused for Rouge's liking.

"Well, bless mah stars if it isn't little ol' Rouge!" Super-Pinup-Bunnie greeted.

"How ya doin', girl?" Mirror-Pinup-Bunnie finished.

"I'm... fine," Rouge forced herself to switch mental tracks to 'mission mode' so she could focus and not embarrass herself. "It's good to see you again, Bunnie and..." *'Damnit, of all the times to forget a name!'* (9)

"Antoine D'Coolette, madame," the swordsman reached out to grasp her hand, and brought it to his lips for the most feather-light of kisses. "I am here for enterink ze tournament."

"The poker tournament?" Rouge blinked in surprise, ignoring the daggers Shadow was staring at Antoine for his gesture.

"But of course!"

"Sugah-Twan's gonna win us a Chaos Emerald," Super-Pinup-Bunnie tittered.

"Are you entering too?" Rouge asked calculatingly.

"Nah," Mirror-Pinup-Bunnie waved the idea off. "We're just here ta cheer our hubbie on and all."

"Indeed, for where eez a card playahr without heez luckiest of charming ones?"

"I see..." Shadow replied before Rouge could.

"Well, we must be gettink registahred for ze tournament," Antoine declared. "We shall be seeink you latahr! Au revoir!"

Rouge watched them leave, her head whirling as she processed this development.

"Well?" Shadow interrupted her thoughts. "What do you think?"

"I think Mr. D'Coolette has brought a very effective and technically legal method of distracting the other players with him," Rouge replied coolly. "I'm going to have to step up my game for this."

"Tails? Rotor?" Sally asked her friends.

"Almost finished, Sally," the mechanical genius replied.

"Just a few more seconds and..." the two-tailed child genius stuck out his tongue in concentration as he typed away, "we're in!"

"Firewalls bypassed. Trackers are none the wiser. You're good to go, NICOLE."

"Understood," the holo-lynx replied as she prepared to transmit herself into a potentially hostile system. "I'll be back shortly."

"Man, this brings back memories," Sonic grinned as he danced around a red-eyed duplicate of himself. A short distance away, Rock dueled with his own copy. Mimic ghosts, both of them, attempting to frighten the interlopers away.

"Of what?" Rock replied as he ducked a shot from his opponent and sweeped the spectre off its feet. "The time you entered me in that fighting tournament without asking?"

"Hey, you were awesome!" Sonic replied, bicycle kicking his phantom double. "Not many people can handle Emerl straight off the bat like that."

"He was challenging, but a good friend until Eggman got him."

"True, but he got rebuilt."

"And reprogrammed. Ugh... Gemerl would have been a lot nastier if it wasn't for Cream. Does she talk him down every Loop?"

"More or less. It's a rare variant that those two don't make friends."

"Okay," Shade told the rest of the team as they entered through the Zone's portal, "we need to be alert and ready for any...thing?"

Spread before them was a massive checkered landscape comprised of bizarrely and complexly arranged paths with foreign objects scattered about.

"Assessing..." the friendly Joe unit intoned with a hint of bewildered curiosity. "Foreign objects appear to be large flippers and bumpers?"

"Oh, dear Walkers," Mighty groaned, "this is some sort of massive pinball maze, isn't it?"

"I-it could b-b-be worse..." Ray stuttered. "T-there could be... b-b-badniks!"

"Yeah, that would make this *really* annoying," Mighty agreed.

"N-n-no!" Ray pointed off towards the distance. "B-B-BADNIKS!"

Rouge glared across the tournament table at the coyote. He was good at this.

As she'd expected, her usual tricks to distract opponents in the game weren't working on him. But then, if he could keep his cool while two super-pinup versions of his very adoring wife very shamelessly hung all over him, then there probably wasn't much her own charms could do. (10)

He was also very good at keeping his tells under wraps and sending up false ones. He'd almost gotten her thinking he was bluffing once which had turned out disastrous for another player.

But she intended to walk out of here with that Chaos Emerald. One way or another...

"NICOLE?" Sally asked as her friend's holographic form reappeared in the room.

"Done," NICOLE replied as Rotor and Tails went to work erasing any trace of their hacking. "It is as you suspected, Sally. Dr. Eggman does indeed have a Chaos Emerald in his possession. The yellow one. It is currently housed in one of his storage facilities planetside."

"Alright then," Sally nodded. "We'll just have to relieve him of it, won't we?"

"Damnit!" Sonic cursed as he pulled out yet another item from his subspace pocket that was useless in this situation while running along the wall. "I know I have a proton pack in here *somewhere* !"

"Well hurry it up!" Rock yelled back as he fired on something Peter Venkman would have called a 'giant demonic Slimer', the ghostly green glow of the spectre coming from the Chaos Emerald it had apparently ingested and was still visible deep within its ectoplasmic form.

"I'm working on it!" Sonic yelled back as, while donging swipes from the Chaos-empowered ghost, he pulled out an empty pokeball, a few dozen rings, some spare shoes, three playbills from Broadway and one from Kabuki-za, a photo of Sally and Amy making out (11), and a Sega Dreamcast. "I know I put it in here! Right aft–oh..."

"What 'oh'?" Rock called back as he jumped over a blast of spectral energy.

"I gave it to Tails a couple Loops back for maintenance..." Sonic replied sheepishly. "Still haven't gotten it back from him..."

"Okay, plan 'b' then. We go straight for the Emerald itself."

"Hmm..." Antoine mused long and hard about his decision as Rouge simply smirked back from her seat at the table. She'd just gone all-in on this hand, meaning if he called the tournament was over. But if he folded, he'd still be way behind given the size of the pot. "I do not zink you are doink ze bluffink... But I simply must know what you are havink in your hand. Call."

Rouge's smile didn't slip for a moment as Antoine shoved the remainder of his chips into the middle of the table. Nor did it as she

revealed her cards. "Read 'em and weep D'Coolette: Royal Flush. Diamonds. Looks like I win."

As Rouge happily reached for the massive pile of chips. Antoine cleared his throat.

"I am zinkink you should not be so fast, madamoiselle..."

"What?" Rouge glared back. "Unless you have a royal flush of your own, then–"

"Non, non... Nothink of ze sort. I am merely havink ze humble full house," Antoine waved off the idea casually. "It eez ze *contents* of zat full house zat I am findink plus intéressant..."

With that, Antoine began laying down his cards one at a time. The jack of clubs, the jack of hearts, the queen of spades, the queen of hearts...

And the queen of diamonds.

The crowd observing the tournament sucked in their breath as one when the identity of Antoine's last card was made known and looked between it and the identical card in Rouge's diamond royal flush. (12)

"...shit," Rouge muttered audibly before she threw something at her feet that created a great plume of smoke.

"There's t-the emerald!" Ray shouted, pointing to a shining blue glow in the distance.

"Great!" Mighty sighed in relief. His shell ached so much after all of those bumpers and flippers and... "Let's get it and get out of this place befor–"

"Are we having fun yet?!" a giant round machine with a manic grin painted on it and what looked like a fuse protruding from the top shouted as it landed in front of the emerald.

"Before that happens?" Joe finished sardonically.

"If that thing starts throwing 'smiley bombs' at us, then I can't be held responsible for my actions," Shade twitched and fingered the explosives on her belt.

"Remember our wager," NICOLE reminded Sally with an audible smirk as she hacked the lock on the storage container housing the Emerald in her computer form.

"I do," Sally retorted, keeping an eye out for sentries. "You just remember that you forfeit if you deliberately set off any alarms."

Rouge checked her surroundings as she landed on the Casinopolis rooftop before breathing a sigh of relief and taking out the purple Chaos Emerald. She gazed at it for a bit, feeling the victory a bit bittersweet. She'd come so close to winning it legally after all an–

"I see you had to resort to cheating," Shadow's voice startled Rouge out of her thoughts. He even had an insufferably smug look on his face. "Looks like I won our bet."

Rouge blinked and then groaned. She'd thought it would be relatively easy to keep to that given that the deck being used was a one-of-a-kind printing made exclusively for the tournament. At least the backs were. And then that coyote had gone and become a serious threat to her chances and she let her pride get the better of her.

When Rouge finally looked up, she saw Shadow smirking and holding up a black leather outfit consisting of a corset, a bikini-style bottom, high heel boots, and elbow-length gloves. It appeared

designed to make the wearer look like a cross between a biker and a burlesque dancer.

"I can't believe you expect me to wear something like *that* ," she glared at the dark hedgehog.

Shadow just quirked an eyebrow back at her and pointedly looked over Rouge's current form-hugging outfit.

"Yeah, I knew how hypocritical that sounded the moment I said it..."

"–and eet eez ze pity she felt she had to be doink ze cheatink, since she was havink ze four tens beneath ze illusion," Antoine finished reporting in.

"Poor Rouge," Roll did her best to not giggle at the bat's fortune.

"Anyway, we're gonna take our little ol' time and see a few sights 'afore we go, Roll-girl," Bunnie replied.

"Ah saw a tacky ol' Casinopolis weddin' chapel with the most inappropriate weddin' dresses bein' advertised," Bunnie's mirror-doppelganger added with a suggestive grin.

"Aren't you already married this Loop?" Roll asked with an amused tone.

"Yeah, but these are tha kinda dresses a gal like me wouldn't want ta wear in front a' her friends even *with* fur ta keep me modest," Bunnie clarified.

"Plus sugah-Twan's only married ta tha original," Bunnie's mirror-doppleganger sighed in an overly dramatic fashion. "And Ah'm not long fer this world. Ah'd so love ta be married ta mah handsome love alongside mah real self and put that little ol' honeymoon suite we rented through it's paces and all afore Ah fade away back inta mah original's head."

"I *so* want details when you get back," Roll giggled.

"It was an annoying Zone, but mission accomplished," Shade informed her client's pink friend. "Ray and Joe are on their way with the Emerald."

"Sweet!" Amy replied. "And what are you and Mighty gonna do?"

"Mighty said he was going to look up a good massage parlor to get the kinks out of his back from pinballing all over the place. As for me, I intend to put on something tropical and revealing and go tease Knuckles for a bit."

"Ooo..." Amy grinned. "Someone's looking to get lu~cky!"

"Lucky or not, it should be entertaining."

"I am so glad that ghosts in this Loop don't leave ectoplasmic residue," Sonic groused as he walked into the interior of Sky Patrol tossing the green Chaos Emerald from hand to hand. "Because, seriously, it's really gross and often a pain in the tuckus to wash out of anything."

"Really?" Rock blinked. "What's the best stuff to clean it with?"

"Interesting fact, you tak–whoa... Dang, Sal," Sonic whistled in appreciation. "Been awhile since you wore the vest and boots combo. I like."

"I'm sure you do," Sally rolled her eyes as she crossed her arms over her open blue vest and tapped her blue-booted foot on the floor. About the only other thing she wore were her gloves and the attached wrist armaments, her brown fur being the only thing keeping her modest.

"Hey, you won't hear me complaining," Sonic smirked and waggled his eyebrows, "though why the sudden change?"

Sally sighed. "NICOLE and I had a bet going on retrieving one of the Chaos Emeralds from Dr. Eggman. I bet that I could get in and out without anyone being the wiser and she bet that something would go wrong with the mission."

"And you lost," Sonic grinned.

"Technically we both did," NICOLE said as she entered in an outfit identical to Sally's, only purple. "While we did enter and leave without being detected, someone else got to the emerald first."

"Ouch," Rock winced as he dismissed his armor, reappearing in a blue shirt and black pants. "Tough break."

"Eh, we'll get it next time," Sonic shrugged and waggled his eyebrows at Sally again. "For now, I kind of want to hang out and enjoy the view."

"Ha, ha," Sally glared at Sonic, trying to hide her embarrassment.

"I think I would like to take in a movie," NICOLE declared as she walked up to Rock and looked him in the eye. "Would you care to accompany me?"

Rock blinked for a moment. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Affirmative."

"...Sure, why not?"

Sonic and Sally watched the two leave before either of them spoke.

"Her asking big blue out was part of your bet, wasn't it?"

"So what if it was?" Sally smirked. "She needs a love life that I can tease her about for a change."

"And, since you both lost the bet," Sonic continued on his train of thought, "that means you have to agree to something as well. Likely with good-looking me."

"Maybe..." Sally looked away.

"Something like..." Sonic leaned over and whispered in Sally's ear.

The princess turned beet red and punched him.

The pastor of Quickie Vows didn't even blink when the trio told him their story. After all, he'd seen just about everything. Things like polyamory and homosexual weddings had stopped being even remotely shocking to him a long time ago.

The guy and ladies were high off of a big poker casino win?

Happened all the time. At least these three weren't drunk and/or high on something.

They honestly wanted the cheesiest, tackiest, spur-of-the-moment Casinopolis wedding he could provide?

Heck, that was his entire business model. Said so right on the window.

The guy was already married to one of the ladies?

Meh, put it down as a renewal of vows. People would be surprised how often that happened to him.

The ladies wanted two of the fetish wedding dresses that the place made for the various subcultures that Casinopolis attracted like a picnic does ants?

Been there, done that.

The other lady was the first's magically created self-aware doppelganger whose memories would integrate with her original when she faded in a couple of days?

He'd have guessed evil or mirror twin, personally. That story seemed to come through his door every other month. He wasn't completely sure, but this might be a new one.

It was still nothing compared to the lady who was just in there last week wanting to marry the dress she was wearing to her toaster.

Sonic groaned from the surprisingly deep impression of himself, "Yeah, I'll admit I asked for that one." He then popped out of the whole with a goofy smirk on his face, "Still didn't hear a no, though."

A giggle escaped the still-blushing Sally, who turned and said, "Give me a minute" before walking out of the room.

Sonic fist-pumped in victory. (13)

"Okay, I'll admit this does look good on me," Rouge smirked as she and Shadow strolled into the G.U.N. base. The sight within immediately prompted their good mood to grind to a halt. There was damage everywhere, and G.U.N. soldiers running around like ants in a decimated mound. Down one hall, they could see a technician reattaching Omega's arm.

"What happened here?" Shadow demanded of the first soldier to pass him.

"The base was attacked, sir," the soldier replied hastily. "By a robot matching the description of Metal Sonic."

"What did he do?" Rouge demanded. "What did he take?"

"He... he captured..." the soldier stammered under the glare from both members of Team Dark.

"Who?" Shadow growled. "Who. Did. He. Capture?"

The soldier gulped. "Bass and Treble..."

Knuckles and Shade were rudely awoken when the alarms he'd set for the Master Emerald began blaring. As the two shook themselves to full awareness, the alarms increased in intensity indicating a progression from 'intruder alert' to 'Master Emerald stolen'.

"I swear," Knuckles groaned, thankful for the backup power systems in place, "next Loop I'm putting enough death traps around that thing to redefine the term 'meat grinder'..."

Vanilla the Rabbit was of two minds about her daughter being a Freedom Fighter, however provisional. One the one hand, she couldn't be prouder of her girl for standing up to bad people. On the other, her little girl was still so young and innocent, so she worried. Of course, she'd also made a great many friends, so Vanilla supposed the gain was positive–

"CHAO-NAPPINGS?!" Cream's shocked exclamation came from the yard. Vanilla rushed to the window just in time to see her daughter and her chao friend Cheese vanish into the nearby woods at a fast clip.

"Gemerl!" Vanilla called out frantically.

"I heard," the android replied as he followed. "Don't worry, I'll keep her safe."

High above the planet, in the flagship of Dr. Eggman's cloaked fleet:

"Sir," Orbot pleaded as his boss looked over the container in front of him, "if you'll just listen to me, there's been some disturb–"

"Quiet, you," Eggman snapped as he began punching in the code. "I want to savor the delivery of my Chaos Emerald, which I shall use in my latest plan to goad those meddlesome blue heroes into my grasp. And when they come, as they surely will, then my real plan will–eh?"

The container had opened with a hiss, but when Eggman looked inside it, there was a notable lack of the yellow Chaos Emerald he was expecting.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wily Rules and Eggman Drools! P-p-b-b-t-t-t-t-t!"

Instead there was a hologram of that despicable Albert's face in full mocking expression, tongue out and all.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS!" Eggman smashed the holographic emitter with his fist. "ORBOT, PREPARE MY WAR MACHINES! THIS INSULT WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO STAND!"

"Th-th-that's what I've been t-t-trying to tell you, boss!" Orbot backed away nervously. "All of the war machines you've completed have been stolen! Along with many of your badniks and egg pawns! A-a-a-a–"

"SPIT IT OUT ALREADY!"

"Metal Sonic is also missing..."

"WHAT?! I... THAT'S... WHY DO I EVEN BOTHER REBUILDING HIM ANYWAY?!" (14)

High above the planet, within the interstellar amusement park Wily World:

Dr. Wily fumed over the robotic phony of that imbecilic Ivo. Of all the gall! To burst into Wily's own base and attack like that! And then for the whole thing to prove a mere diversion!

"Status!" he demanded of the Genesis Unit.

"Bad, sir," Buster Rod G reported. "Many of the new models you'd been working on were taken, along with... the Special Wily Numbers."

"How many?"

"I'm afraid all of them, sir..."

"OF ALL THE..." Dr. Wily spat. He'd meant those as a gift to Bass! See if his boy had what it took to succeed where Wily himself had kept falling short! "READY THE SKULL FLEET! IF IVO WANTS A WAR–"

"–HE'LL GET ONE!" Dr. Eggman commanded.

Somewhere else entirely:

He came online and looked around the room he was in. There was a metal canine next to him... his support unit; a metal mobian hedgehog... his partner; ten more bipedal figures of varying shapes and sizes... his army; and a bald rotund man with a large gray mustache... his master.

"Excellent!" the rotund man laughed. "How do you feel?"

"Ready to serve, master," he stood and bowed. "I shall see your enemies driven before you and record the lamentations of their loved ones."

"Excellent! Excellent!" the man laughed maniacally. "Everything is going exactly as planned!" (15)

"So, yeah, I agreed to convince the rest of the Chaotix to help look after the island while Knuckles hunts down whoever stole the Master Emerald, except Ray and Joe who Vector put on the missing chao case," Shade informed over the communicator.

"And you want me to back him up, I take it," Blues replied casually.

"You did practically raise him on the island this Loop," Shade reminded the red raider. "He'll accept help from you that he might not from anyone else."

"Damnit," Shadow swore as he got ready. "I can understand Metal Sonic hitting the G.U.N. base, but why capture Bass and Treble? And why just them?"

"Insufficient data," Omega replied. "Suggest hunting down quarry and asking the question at gunpoint."

"Before or after you fire?" Rouge asked.

"I am flexible," Omega intoned.

"Why am I not surprised..." Rouge sighed. "Anyway, I'm going to be you two's eye in the sky, so don't count on me in a fight right away."

"Understood," Shadow nodded.

"Okay everyone," Sally told the room. "We've got multiple situations going on right now. Tails and Roll?"

"Yes, Aunt Sally?"

"There's been a rash of chao disappearances lately, and apparently Cream's run off to investigate by herself. She's got Gemerl with her, but I want you two to back her up and help investigate. If your situation resolves early, rendezvous with Sonic and Rock."

"And what are we gonna be doing?" Sonic asked with a confident smirk.

"Metal Sonic's been sighted again," Sally informed them. "No information if he's the same one as before rebuilt or a completely new version."

"Gotcha, Sal. Hunt him down and smash with extreme prejudice."

"I think she'd like to know what he's up to first if possible," Rock cut in with bemusement.

"I most certainly would," Sally replied. "Amy and Rotor, the scans of Drs. Wily and Eggman mobilizing their fleets in space and moving on each other worries me. Try and find out what the heck set them off and see if you can possibly defuse the situation before their fight starts to affect anyone else. Get Antoine and Bunnie to help the moment they get back and bring Big in if you need the extra muscle. But so long as the doctors don't shoot at anything but each other, don't put yourself in harm's way."

"Roger that, Sally," Rotor agreed before Amy could protest being away from Sonic. "What about you and NICOLE?"

"We're going to be out scanning for the last Chaos Emerald in case we need it sooner than expected. Everyone got your assignments? Alright then, let's go!"

"This lack of chao around Soleanna is very worrisome," Elise muttered as she stepped into a back room away from the messenger who had reported the curious lack of chao sightings among the city's populace. Normally the creatures were very friendly and could be

found in all manner of places. It was just that... right now they weren't.

"Quint," Silver asked after pondering the issue in relation to his experience in the Loops and coming up with a theory he really didn't like, "do you remember scanning Eggman Nega's files before we tracked him back to this timeline? Wasn't there something in them about chao?"

"There was," Quint nodded seriously. "A fire being native to another dimension known as the Ifrit supposedly gained strength from consuming chao..."

"That's awful!" Elise gasped.

"But Nega is trapped in a card in high orbit around the planet," Quint finished. "Surely he–"

"Did we ever go back and check?" Silver reminded his partner.

"No, but–"

"Then how can we be *certain* ?"

Quint was silent in answer.

"That horrid man you told me about?" Elise looked worried. "You think he's..."

"Yes..." Silver's face hardened. "Eggman Nega may still be alive..."

"My fellow robots!" he bellowed as he stood straight and tall before his ten generals, the full bulk of the army behind them, while his partner and support unit flanked him. "We stand ready to carry out the will of our mighty and illustrious master! We shall find what he seeks and secure it for him. All opposition shall be dealt with swiftly and mercilessly! We are strong! Our purpose is noble! Our cause is

just! And the favor of our master goes with us! Spread out and select your target areas for search and waste no time! The glory of our master has waited long enough already!"

A great cheer went up as the robot army began to move out. As it did, his partner wirelessly asked him a question.

"Have no worries, my friend," he assured the metal hedgehog. "We have our own assignment. We are to personally waylay our master's enemies. In fact, I know just the ones we should start with..."

"Ooo...!" Cream worried as she dashed through the forest back and forth, before coming out next to a beach area. "I can't find any signs of chao anywhere! Where could they be, Cheese?"

"Chao-chao-chao..." Cream's companion drooped sadly.

"Miss Cream, thank you for finally slowing down," Gemerl sighed in relief as he caught up with the young rabbit. "It is dangerous to–"

"Gemerl!" the young rabbit brightened at the sight of her friend. "You came to help me rescue the chao-napped chao?"

"Er... that was the general idea..."

"Thank you so much!"

"N-now if I were a chao, where would I b-be...?" Ray pondered as he idly flew along the beach.

"Hiding from whoever wanted to capture you?" Joe suggested. "Assuming you weren't already."

"Well, yeah, but aside from that."

"Don't look at me, I'm not the chao whisperer." (16)

"So, Eggman Nega *might* be alive," Elise offered.

"Yes," Silver replied with a firm nod.

"And he *might* be behind the missing chao," the princess of Soleanna continued.

"It does fit with at least one of his unused schemes," Quint confirmed.

"But you don't know for certain."

"Er..."

"That is... accurate."

"In that case, I would like to remind you both that going on assumptions without evidence can be very dan–"

KA-BOOM!

Without any warning whatsoever, the wall of the room was blown apart. With reflexes honed to a razor's edge, Silver and Quint positioned themselves protectively in front of Elise almost instantly. A moment later and a shimmering barrier created by the princess herself covered them all.

"My sincerest apologies," a somewhat familiar voice came out of the dust as metal footsteps approached. "I meant only to knock, but I'm afraid I don't know my own strength."

As the dust settled, Silver and Quint each did a double-take at the identity of the intruder.

"Bass?" Quint asked in confusion. "What are you doing here? And why..."

Quint trailed off as a second figure was revealed by the settling dust.

"And why are you with Metal Sonic?" Silver asked dangerously.

The eyes of the robotic hedgehog flashed briefly before his black-armored companion spoke.

"It was a fair question, my friend," the black and gold robot spoke to his companion before turning back to the shielded trio. "You see, our master has tasked us with the elimination of his most dangerous enemies."

"Us," Elise nearly whispered.

"Oh, not you, princess," the dark robot gave a very polite smile. "Your powers are defensive in nature. Annoying, perhaps, but no direct threat. These two on the other hand... The warriors from a forgotten future, sent to the past to chase down a man they could never best on their own. Stranded in this time, unable to return. Yes, you are very much a threat indeed."

The robot hedgehog's eyes flashed again.

"Of course, to slay you here would be unsporting. You are, after all, at quite the handicap when you must defend others from collateral damage. So I propose a race. Keep up with my partner and me, and we shall grant you a swift and painless death befitting the warriors you are."

Silver and Quint exchanged wordless glances with each other and Elise before replying as one.

"You're on." (17)

"Okay," Tails looked along the beach he and Roll were searching, "Gemerl's transponder signal is in that direction and–whoa!"

All of a sudden, a squad of robots had charged out of the treeline towards them.

"Bet I can take out more than you," Roll grinned and got into a ready stance.

"You're on!"

"Look, I appreciate the gesture," Knuckles told his crimson companion as he approached a vantage point to get the lay of the land ahead, "but you can go back and tell Shade that I'm perfectly capable of taking care of my–what in the world?"

Down below a robot army marched forth, composed of various badniks and Egg Pawn models, but also mixed with...

"Those are Wily's designs down there," Blues stated after scanning the army, "but I don't recognize many of them... Then again, I'm not in my home Loop for many of the variants."

"But they hate each other this Loop," Knuckles considered the sight. "Why would an army of their mixed designs be marching together?"

"How much you want to bet it has to do with the stolen Master Emerald?"

"Rrrrgh... fine..." Knuckles grudgingly relented before a smile crept up his face. "Nice to have you along, big red."

"Multiple hostiles inbound, you two," Rouge reported over their comlink. "You should be within Omega's range in–shit!"

"Rouge?" Shadow called back on his own set.

"I'm fine," Rouge reported back. "Just ran afoul of these things' own air support. Just take them out fast!"

"Affirmative," Omega intoned as his hands became the barrels for a pair of chainguns that began spinning.

Trees of all shapes and sizes blurred past as the robot hedgehog and his partner raced the silver hedgehog and his green-armored companion far away from the city of Soleanna. As they reached an appropriate distance, the mechanical hedgehog's eyes flashed in signal.

"And here we are," the black-armored member of the duo smiled as he and his partner ceased running and turned to face their pursuers. "Now you can face your ends li–"

"No talking!" Quint yelled as he and Silver kept charging straight for their opponents. "Sakugarne!"

Quint's support unit appeared directly before him in a flash of red light and suddenly both he and the pogo-jackhammer were high in the air raining buster fire down on the opposing duo.

"So uncouth..." the black-armored human android tsked as he easily dodged the fire while his mobian-model partner engaged Silver. As his green armored opponent descended, he strafed for a good shot at the other robot's back and prepared to open fire.

He wasn't quite prepared for the speed at which the other robot spun around and interposed his armored support unit as a shield, causing the rapid buster fire to ping harmlessly off the thick crimson plating. He also wasn't prepared for the psychokinetic blow to the back that blasted him forwards.

It seemed however, that his partner was coming up to blindside the green-armored foe, only for said foe to again spin around and catch the metal hedgehog in a rising blow from his support unit before finishing the spin to bring the same piece of machinery directly into his black chestplate.

With a grunt, he was sent tumbling across the ground. The moment he got his feet under him, he registered the sound of an impact

nearby and noted that his partner had been thrown to the ground by the silver hedgehog as well.

"You're holding back, Bass," the green robot accused. "You should have known what would happen if you did that."

"Indeed," the accused robot admitted. "I have most thoroughly underestimated your ability. But it is no matter. The objective was accomplished."

A shrill whistle and his canine support unit appeared and after a moment united with him.

"We shall see how you fare against the first of my master's armies," the now-winged robot laughed as he rose into the air on his thrusters, his partner right behind him.

The first units of that army were charging Quint and Silver before he was fully gone.

"This is odd..." NICOLE mused as she and Sally flew through the air on their Extreme Gear. "The signal from the last emerald is registering only faintly... like it's in another zone..."

"Can you find the entrance portal?" Sally asked.

"That's just it," NICOLE replied in confusion, "I'm getting multiple readings for the entrance portal, but only partial strength. Almost as if the portal is in pieces."

"That *is* odd... Lock onto the nearest one and let's check it out."

"Got it, Sally, the nearest one is–Look out!"

Both of them swerved sharply as something airborne nearly collided with them, so sharply that they lost control of their Extreme Gear and

began losing altitude. As they dropped near to the ground, a series of egg-shaped explosives were launched up at them from below.

"What the heck is *that* ?" Sonic made a face at the large war machine he and Rock were facing.

"Hohohohoho!" something that sounded like a recording of Eggman's laugh played from the machine. "How do you like my latest creation? The Egg Platypus!"

"The Egg what?" Sonic's face twisted in disgust even further. "Man, you've really hit bottom on ideas, haven't you Baldy McNosehair?"

"Actually, that's a Wily design," Rock supplied as he and Sonic dodged a salvo of egg-shaped bombs. "The Platypressor if I'm not mistaken. I've seen it in a few recurring variants before."

"Okay," Sonic nodded, jumping over a missile, "so someone that sounds like Eggman stole Wily's toys."

"And according to NICOLE, someone swiped the yellow Chaos Emerald from Eggman before she and Sally could and left a hologram of Wily taking credit."

"Yeesh," Sonic grimaced as he decided he'd had enough of dodging and homing attacked the machine, sending sparks flying from damaged circuits on impact. "I think we've figured out why the bad doctors are at each others' throats..."

It had taken them a fair amount of fighting, but Quint and Silver had fought their way to an abandoned building where they were sure the commander was stationed. And, sure enough they'd found what appeared to be a Robot Master waiting inside.

"So you're the commander of this army?" Quint asked of the orange-armored humanoid robot before him. The robot looked... ridiculous. It

wasn't the orange coloration that did it, but rather...

"Are those yo-yos?" Silver raised an eyebrow at the neon-teal additions to the robot's armor. Two on each feet almost like wheels, one in each hand (possibly produced by the large openings on the underside of his wrist armor), a pair of small ones where his ears would be, and a gigantic one on his forehead.

"Of course!" the robot grinned back confidently. "I am the invincible Yo-Yo Man! My terrible and mighty power shall carve you to shreds!" (18)

"Uh-huh..." Quint snorted dubiously. "What are you going to do, walk the dog?"

"Why not?" Yo-Yo Man smirked. "I'll consider it a last request of yours! Here it comes!"

With that, the Robot Master whipped his arms forward and released a yo-yo each at both Quint and Silver. Yo-yos that promptly sprouted razor-sharp blades as they easily cut through the cement floor and sped at their targets.

Quint and Silver wasted no time getting out of the way and watched as the bladed yo-yos returned to Yo-Yo Man's hands, retracting their blades at the last moment.

"That's the deadliest dog walking I've ever seen..." Silver offered.

"Now try this trick!" Yo-Yo Man grinned as he jumped into the air and again flung his bladed yo-yos at them. They dodged easily, and Silver attempted to counter with a homing attack, only to be kicked away when he got close. Quint managed to take advantage of the opening to shoot Yo-Yo Man in the back. The Robot Master grimaced from the shots as he retracted his weapons and landed before whipping them at Quint one after the other.

The robot from the future dove to the side as Silver psychokinetically slung some debris into Yo-Yo Man's back.

"Looks like you can't keep up with us," Silver smirked.

"Cut the crap!" Yo-Yo Man shot back angrily. "I've still got my best stuff! Let's see you handle this one!"

Yo-Yo Man whipped his head this time, sending the giant yo-yo mounted to his helmet shooting upwards where it lodged its blades in the ceiling before the attached cable pulled Yo-Yo Man upwards where he swung through the air.

"And now..." Yo-Yo Man grinned. "Around the World!"

He whipped forth first one and then the other of his bladed yo-yos to grind across the floor at blinding speed, then up the walls, across the ceiling, down the other wall, and back across the floor again before returning to his hands.

Quint and Silver dodged the bladed hazards readily, but the way their opponent was swinging around made it hard to counterattack while they avoided his strikes.

"Hey, Silver," Quint spoke as the two evaded another round, "do you remember what we did to Nega's Egg Pendulum?"

Silver blinked for a moment. Quint's recollection of their shared post-Solaris history was clearer than his own (Silver was never quite clear on why those particular Loop memories always came in fuzzy for him, continually leaving pre-Solaris memories clearer for him when those events took place), but after a moment he recalled one of their battles with the madman before coming back in time and grinned.

"Sounds like a plan."

"Then let's go! Sakugarne!" Quint summoned his support unit and bounded into the air where Yo-Yo Man's current swing was set to

take him.

"Oh no you don't!" Yo-Yo Man countered with a kick that clanged off of Sakugarne's armor and just sent himself back the other way that much faster.

"Service!" Silver called out as he rose to meet Yo-Yo Man's swing, deflecting the latest throw of bladed yo-yos with some psychikinetically manipulated debris and kicked the Robot Master back at Quint.

Quint bounced up to meet the return swing on Sakugarne and swung the support unit like a bat, clobbering Yo-Yo Man back at his partner.

Silver met the disoriented robot with his psychokinesis and gave a hard mental shove back at Quint, who had bounced back up and was now holding Sakugarne like a jousting lance.

With a mighty crunch, Sakugarne punched through Yo-Yo Man's torso armor and then the jackhammer point pistoned forward to blow the back of the Robot Master's torso out. Yo-Yo Man had an utterly shocked look on his face as his systems failed and his eyes went blank before he crashed into the ground.

"Well, that was fun," Silver dusted his hands off. "Still... this is more up Wily's alley than Nega's. Or even Dr. Eggman's for that matter."

"True," Quint nodded. "And this is clearly one of his designs..."

Quint bent over and touched the Robot Master, the green parts of his armor turning orange while the lighter lime green parts became a bright teal.

"Wow... It's been forever since you used your copy chip to get weapons," Silver noted.

"Nega never really made anything worth having," Quint shrugged. "And he still hasn't. The original serial for this one places him as one

of the Special Wily Numbers. The same series as Bass himself."

"The 'original' serial number?" Silver asked.

"Yeah," Quint nodded. "The SWN designation has been overwritten by an ENN one."

"EN–" Silver cut off as he realized what that had to stand for.

"Eggman Nega..." they both said together.

"You're here to help us rescue the chao?" Cream asked with excitement.

"Of course we are, Cream," Tails replied easily.

"You're our friend and we know how much you love chao," Roll added.

"Yay!"

"Good to have you aboard," Gemerl replied politely.

"I bet me and Gemerl can rescue more chao than you can!"

"It's 'Gemerl and I', Cr–"

"You're on!" Tails accepted with a grin.

"More hostiles inbound," Rouge reported to Shadow and Omega. "Look to be stronger than most of the others we've seen so far."

"As long as they aren't as ridiculous as that platypus robot, I don't care," Shadow growled back. "I could use something to take my frustrations out on."

"Let the fools come and face our superior power," Omega agreed in his usual monotone.

"Hold one, I'm increasing the zoom on my lens for a better look..." Rouge continued. "It looks like Metal Sonic and..."

"And...?" Shadow prompted into the silence.

"I don't believe this..." Rouge whispered incredulously.

"State the identity of the soon-to-be-scrapped target," Omega insisted.

"It's..."

"Well, well, if it isn't the noble Agents of G.U.N..." a voice far too familiar for Shadow's comfort interrupted, prompting him to turn in its direction.

Shadow felt his mind skip a groove at the sight. That looked like Metal Sonic alright, but right next to him...

"Precisely who we were looking for," the other figure smiled regally. "You see, our master has ordered your demise. I hope that you are able to meet your end with dignity befitting warriors of your station."

"Bass?" Omega queried in a primarily monotone voice that still held more confusion than either Rouge or Shadow could recall any version of their war machine ally ever expressing. "Error: Does not compute..."

"It seems we may have come at a bad time, my friend," the familiar black and gold robot spoke to the silent blue robotic hedgehog next to him, getting a flash of red optics in response. "True, we are pressed for time. I'm afraid we simply cannot wait fo–"

The robotic hedgehog whipped his head around suddenly and activated a force field as he interposed himself between the humanoid robot and an incoming plasma blast.

"I don't know what the hell your game is, Bass, but you will tell me where the Master Emerald is!" Knuckles accused as he and Blues landed nearby.

"I beg your pardon?" the black robot quirked an eyebrow at the accusation.

"Don't play dumb with us," Blues shot back calmly. "I detected multiple wireless commands being issued to the latest robot army from both you and your 'friend' there. Whatever's going on, you're neck deep in it."

The robot hedgehog's eyes flashed and his humanoid companion got a considering look on his face.

"I agree. This just became more problematic than it's worth. Time for a tactical withdrawal."

"Oh no you don't!" Knuckles yelled as the two enemy robots turned and sped off. "Get back here and answer me!"

"After them!" Rouge insisted through Shadow and Omega's communicators. "We need to find out what happened to Bass before they get to him!"

"Sorry," the red raider smirked as the two teams took off after their mutual quarry, "you'll have to get in line. No cutting."

"Lines are for inferior models," Omega retorted.

"Damnit, we're getting nowhere like this..." Silver cursed as he and Quint fought their way through a gauntlet of brightly colored lasers. "Bass and Metal Sonic are long gone by now..."

"Did someone say 'Metal Sonic'?" a familiar voice cut in. Silver turned to see a pair of familiar blue figures joining up with him and

Quint. "Cause we heard that faker was up to no good somewhere around here."

"If it isn't the 'Iblis triggers'," Quint smirked at Sonic's reflexive scowl, ducking under another laser as he did. "What brings you around here?"

"We heard Metal Sonic had been seen and we're here to find out what he's up to," the Mega Man replied as he blasted one of the laser guidance robots to face in a different direction.

"He's one of the ones commanding these robot armies," Quint replied. "Along with Bass."

The robot from the future did his best to conceal a smirk as the Mega Man stumbled momentarily from that bit of information.

"Bass?" the blue bomber asked in confusion, sliding under another of the laser beams.

"With Metal Sonic?" the blue blur sounded just as incredulous as he jumped the same beam of light.

"That's what we saw," Silver confirmed, psychokinetically turning two of the laser guidance robots on each other.

"Okay," the Mega Man's expression hardened. "We really need to get to the bottom of this, fast."

"Sounds good to me," Sonic nodded. "Right after we survive these 'happy shiny beams of death' here." (19)

"Y-you f-f-found anything yet?" Ray asked.

"Not yet, but we're getting closer," Sally replied, looking at the display on NICOLE's hand-held body while the pocket supercomputer's holographic form followed nearby.

"Why are you two following us anyway?" NICOLE asked. "I understand that your case is to investigate missing chao."

"Neither of us happened to be outfitted for chao tracking when we were assigned," Joe shrugged, "and Vector insisted that we had to start immediately."

"So you're hoping to get lucky," NICOLE nodded. (20)

"Y-yeah," Ray rubbed his head sheepishly. "P-p-pretty much."

"Just don't attempt to steal whatever we find an–" NICOLE cut off suddenly and looked in the direction of Sally who was clearing away some thick underbrush.

"A-and what?" Ray blinked nervously.

"It's here," Sally said as she delved deeper into the undergrowth. "It's right..."

Sally trailed off as she stopped and stared at something she'd uncovered while the other three joined her and looked at the object over her shoulder.

"W-what is it?" Ray asked in confusion.

The object Sally had uncovered seemed to be a large curved piece of machinery colored a pale cyan that shimmered independent of the light that shone on it. As is shimmered, parts of it seemed to fade from sight and then back again as the four watched.

"Scanning..." Joe intoned and his single optic flashed. "Scans inconclusive. Unknown physical composition. Multiple partial matches on known energy signatures, but no full match in existing database."

"Whatever it is, it's emanating the partial energy signature concurrent with a portal leading to a Zone that contains a Chaos Emerald," NICOLE added.

"Is th-that a letter on it?" Ray blinked and leaned closer to the object. "I-I-It l-looks like a k-k-k-'K'..."

"You are all indeed as skilled as your files would indicate," a voice greeted the two teams of robot and hedgehog. It was hard to see where the voice came from as at some point, something had darkened the sky above into an artificial night. "But you should know that even your great skills shall fall short in the face of the power arrayed against you."

"Who's there?" Silver demanded. "Show yourself!"

"A storm is coming..." the voice declared as a robot dropped from above to face the quartet. He possessed magenta armor with lime green highlights, including the lime green antenna jutting up from his helmet and a pair of dark shades lowered over his eyes. His right arm ended in what looked like an energy crossbow rather than a hand. Bright lights flashing a rainbow of colors were embedded on his shins, forearms, torso, and ringing the top of his helmet. "...and I am its herald."

"Who the heck are you supposed to be?" Sonic gave the brightly colored robot an odd look. "Rainbow Man?"

"I was unaware my reputation had preceded me," the Robot Master seemed mildly surprised.

"...You're *kidding* me..." Sonic gaped. "That's... That's the most ridiculous thing I've... Gah!" (21)

"Which probably means he's just as dangerous," Rock readied his arm cannon.

"Yeah, we had a reminder about that recently," Quint agreed, mirroring the movement and smirking. "Whoever beats him gets to keep his weapon."

"Huh?" Rock blinked and almost missed Rainbow Man starting his attack.

"Take this!" the brightly colored robot jumped and fired a shining energy arrow into the ground before the group. Rather than dissipate, the energy arrow actually stuck in the ground, allowing the prism-shaped top to sit in prominence.

The group realized the purpose for the energy-formed prism and scattered right as Rainbow Man shot the object with a multi-colored laser, resulting in a wide shimmering cone-shaped beam of death and destruction that the four barely avoided.

"Oh come on!" Sonic yelled. "We had enough 'happy shiny beams of death' just getting here!"

"There it is!" Cream pointed at the bizarre vehicle that had sucked up a pair of chao in front of the two teams before turning and burning rubber in the other direction. "You let those chao go you big meanie!"

The vehicle looked like the illegitimate offspring of a dragster and an armadillo, with a spiked mace glued to the end of its tail that bounced along dangerously behind it as it sped on its way.

"Ohohohohoho!" a recorded Eggman laugh played. "You're fast, but no match for my supreme Egg Liner!"

"Buddy, that has got to be the ugliest car I've ever seen, and that's saying something," Gemerl narrowed his eyes as the four closed in on the machine.

"I've seen worse, but it's still up there," Tails agreed as he flew along and punched in some numbers on his handheld device. "Okay, I'm showing a weak point in the back–"

"–at the base of the tail, right?" Roll finished, earning an exasperated look from the flying fox. "What? It's clear that area's designed for a

rear-facing cockpit, which is where all of Eggman's machines are vulnerable. You'd think none of us had done this before."

"I know, but–"

"Don't worry, Mr. Tails, there'll be plenty of time to impress me when I'm older," Cream smiled innocently.

"Wha–I–Bu–" Tails sputtered and nearly dropped from his flight.

"I wonder who told her to say that?" Roll whispered to Gemerl. "Amy? Bunnie? Sally? NICOLE?"

"I believe it was her mother, actually," Gemerl whispered back. (22)

"Give it up, Bass!" the black hedgehog known as Shadow declared as he and his bat companion Rouge flanked the black robot on one side while the crimson echidna Knuckles and the Proto Man covered his other side. "We have you surrounded! There's no escape!"

"That's is where you have erred!" he shot back, hastily reviewing his options. His partner was currently pinned down under his forcefield attempting to wait out the seemingly endless stream of bullets that the walking arsenal was firing at him. Did that thing ever run out of ammunition?

It looked like he needed his support unit again. His master had made sure he was strong, but one against four were not the most favorable odds. He whistled shrilly and felt the appearance of his canine companion entering the field of battle.

"Crash!" he called out immediately after sending the target info wirelessly. His canine support did not disappoint as the robot dog immediately pounced on the walking arsenal Omega with a loud crash, finally allowing his partner to drop the forcefield and engage the hostiles.

"It's been a pleasure," he bid his opponents farewell with both his words and scattered shots from his buster, "but I'm afraid I have other appointments to keep!"

"Damnit!" one of his opponents cursed furiously. "Don't let them escape!"

'Split up,' he sent the plan to his partner and support unit wirelessly as they all fled. *'They can't follow us all. Do your best to lose pursuit and join back up.'*

"How the heck does someone that slow move that fast?!" Sonic complained as he got back to his feet from his tumble. He could be forgiven for calling Rainbow Man slow, as many were compared to Sonic. Rainbow Man might not have been the fastest Robot Master ever, but he was no slouch. He was also surprisingly nimble and had impressive reaction times.

"Do you inferior lifeforms do anything but complain?" the lights on Rainbow Man's armor flashed a multitude of colors as he fired another bright shimmering laser beam at them, almost blinding in the artificial night around them.

"We kick robot ass!" Silver shot back as Rock and Quint returned buster fire, along with a large piece of debris that he'd hefted with his psychokinesis. The piece of debris clipped Rainbow Man as he dodged, sending the robot tumbling.

"A lucky shot..." Rainbow Man growled as a small cloud gathered above him. "It shall be your last..."

The cloud suddenly began raining, along with two others in the room and Rainbow Man vanished from sight in the deluge. Completely from sight; magenta armor, lime green highlights, multicolored lights, and all.

"Okay, hiding something *that* obnoxiously bright?" Sonic grunted. "I hate to say it, but I'm impressed."

"I doubt it's simply to hide," Rock turned to one of the other clouds in the room and aimed his arm cannon at it. "Be ready for an attack. Probably lightning."

"Makes sense," Quint decided to cover the third raining cloud while Sonic and Silver watched the first that Rainbow Man had vanished into. "Where do you think it'll come from?"

"I just assume it'll be all of them," Rock replied right as all three clouds flashed and unleashed glowing blue orbs of electricity at them all. From the could Quint was covering, Rainbow Man popped straight up into the air and fired another of his bright energy arrows. They all jumped away from the impact zone, which was fortunate as this time the arrow unleashed a wave of yellow electricity along the ground in all directions when it hit. And again it stuck, with an energy prism topping it, ready for the laser Rainbow Man was already preparing to fire the moment he landed.

Quint was already opening up with his arm cannon the moment he'd jumped out of the energy arrow's way and when he saw Rainbow Man's plan, he summoned Sakugarne to block the laser shot from hitting the energy prism and becoming a wide-beam attack.

"That won't save you!" Rainbow Man yelled as he charged while Rock and Sonic were having to adjust to the realization that they weren't going to have to evade a wide-beam laser again.

"Silver!" Quint called out as his armor turned red and teal and he threw a Yo-Yo Cutter at his opponent. "You hold!"

Rainbow Man contemptuously backhanded the bladed weapon and jumped over the combined assault of Rock's buster fire and Sonic's Spin Dash.

And then he was caught in mid-air by a psychic aura, immobilizing him.

"And you punch," Silver grinned as Quint donned Sakugarne's power adaptor.

The pistoned blow of Quint's power adaptor's fists practically blew Rainbow Man in half from the fully-charged body blow he landed.

"Ow..." Sonic winced as Silver released the Robot Master and let him collapse.

"Agreed," Rock nodded, watching Quint claim Rainbow Man's weapon, the futuristic robot's green armor turning magenta while the lime green pieces remained the same color.

"I make no apologies for what works," Quint snorted in the direction of the two blue heroes.

"How about brutality?" Sonic snarked. "Do you apologize for that?"

"See previous statement," Quint leveled back, getting a chuckle from Silver.

"In any case," Rock headed off the impending argument. "We need to see if we can track down Bass and Metal Sonic. Good luck to you both."

"You as well," Quint replied.

"I cannot help but feel a bit insulted," Joe mused as he looked at the remains of the squad of yellow-colored Sniper Joes that had ambushed the group. Their energy shots might have been large and bright, but they weren't particularly powerful in comparison with Joe's own buster shots.

"Remind us to tell you about Eggman's Metal Series sometime," NICOLE replied easily as she scanned the remains of a large green machine, one that had hopped around on piston-like limbs trying to crush them all, to ensure it was as inactive as it looked.

"W-wasn't that when h-he made robot doubles of a-a-all the Freedom F-fighters?" Ray asked.

"Yeah," Sally nodded. "Before we were really 'official' even, but none of them had the same level of engineering that Metal Sonic did. I think we all felt insulted by that." (23)

"Perhaps we shall," Joe agreed. "For now though, I think it best that Ray and I investigate where the hostile units came from. Perhaps they are connected to the chao disappearances."

"And Sally and I shall continue searching for these strange items," NICOLE nodded towards the bizarre shimmering/misappearing partial device that Sally was currently storing in her subspace pocket. "Perhaps our paths shall converge later."

"Too bad we lost sight of Cream," Roll stood atop the Egg Liner and scanned the horizon. A lucky shot had sent the young rabbit tumbling through the air into the distance. Cream was probably fine, given that she could fly with her ears, but Gemerl had still jetted off after her and left Roll and Tails to finish off the weird armadillo dragster thing.

"Yeah... I really don't want to explain this to Vanilla," Tails sweatdropped.

"What's the problem?" Roll wondered. "Just tell her what happened. That a dragster/armadillo hybrid machine got in a lucky shot and sent Cream flying into the forest... and I just realized how ridiculous that sounds out of context."

"What possible context could make that sound less ridiculous?" Tails quirked an eyebrow at the golden gladiator.

"Eggman," Roll raised a finger, and then another. "Wily."

"Pfft... That doesn't make it any less ridiculous, just more dangerous."

Roll opened her mouth to argue, and then closed it again, blinking rapidly. "How long did it take you to realize that many of the things you consider normal around Eggman were actually ridiculous?"

"A lot longer than I like to admit," Tails sighed heavily.

Silver and Quint were racing into the heart of the next army of robots when they were nearly blindsides by a crimson projectile. About the only thing that saved them was the enraged shout said projectile announced itself with.

"THERE YOU ARE!" was Silver's only warning to brake before something angry and red impacted the spot he'd been about to cross. "TELL ME WHERE THE MASTER EMERALD IS YO–Wait..." The form of Knuckles blinked as the dust his impact had kicked up cleared. "You're not Metal Sonic."

"DO I LOOK BLUE AND METALLIC TO YOU?!" Silver yelled back at the guardian of Angel Island.

"I don't know, if you tilt your head and squint just right–" Quint cut himself off and turned to the other voice that had been speaking the same words to see the form of the Proto Man looking right back at him.

"Jinx," the red raider smirked, "you owe me an E-Tank."

"Oww..." Cream rubbed her head as she landed on her feet. That had hurt, and it had separated her from Tails and Roll and Gemerl and...

"Chao?"

At least Cheese was still with her.

"Cream?" a familiar voice asked in surprise.

"Miss Sally?" Cream blinked and turned to see the princess looking at her, along with Miss NICOLE.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was rescuing chao when one of Eggman's meanie machines popped up and–"

"Cream!" Gemerl exclaimed as he landed next to Cream. "Thank goodness you are unharmed." The android turned and bowed politely to Sally. "Your highness, thank you for looking after her for me."

"Actually, we just found her," Sally clarified.

"We know you're looking into the missing chao," NICOLE added, "and we have our own mission at the moment."

"I see... Formally requesting permission to join you for the duration, your highness, ma'am. I've detected many dangerous hostiles in the area and I think strength in numbers may be the order of the day. Besides, there is the possibility that your mission and the missing chao are related."

Sally and NICOLE exchanged a momentary glance.

"Why not?"

"Yay!"

He'd shaken the red pair, but the G.U.N. agents had managed to remain on his tail even after he'd rejoined with his partner and

support unit.

"Submit yourself to our custody or be filled with holes," the walking arsenal demanded.

"I'll have to respectfully decline, I'm afraid!" he called back. "I have other demands on my attention at the moment!"

"Like us!" a new voice joined the fray and his partner confirmed the arrival of a pair of blue nuisances and identified them as Sonic and the Mega Man. "I'm always demanding people's attention!"

"Bass!" the Mega Man called out. "I'm giving you one chance to surrender and tell us what you're up to! You and Metal Sonic both!"

"Already tried that, hon!" the bat-woman called. "He's made it pretty clear that option's not up for negotiation!"

"I guess we'll just have to change his mind!" the blue hedgehog sounded way too enthusiastic about the prospect.

"Not if we get to him first!" the black hedgehog shot back.

This was again becoming problematic. Time to call for backup...

"Thanks!" Roll called back as the robot that had been about to ambush her was shot out of the air.

"You're welcome," Joe replied. "I'm just glad you didn't shoot me when we ran into each other."

"R-r-roll wouldn't do th-that!" Ray protested as he divebombed one of the yellow Joe models.

"If these Joe models were green, she might have," Tails used one of his nicknamesakes to swat a grenade back at the robot who threw it. "They've been swarming us ever since we got to this area."

"I like to think I wouldn't have even if they were, but being shot at tends to make me jumpy," Roll replied, shooting a robot that had tried to ambush Joe.

"Understandable," Joe nodded as he took aim at the next wave.

"Come on!" Knuckles yelled as he uppercutted another robot out of the way. "I'm not even working up a sweat!"

"Oh, nice way to tempt fate there, Knuckles," Silver snorted as he psychokinetically shoved a few robots aside himself. "Bets on how long it takes before–"

"ATTEN-SHUN!" a booming voice bellowed, making all of the enemy robots halt what they were doing and stand straight without moving an inch. Even the four heroes paused instinctively at the sound of the voice before turning to its owner.

"That was fast," Quint raised an unseen eyebrow behind his blue shades.

The Robot Master was clad in army green and gunmetal gray armor that looked to have been stripped straight off of a tank. Including the turret and cannon mounted straight to his back, the treads he had instead of feet, the extra cannons mounted to his shins, and the look of the arm cannon he had in place of a right hand. He had a pair of armored plates over his face, one which covered his lower face and whatever mouth he had, and one over his forehead that angled on the bottom over his eyes to give him a perpetually angry look. He was, however, a relatively normal size rather than the bulky look most robots with loads of military hardware possessed.

"All of you metal maggots who can't seem to take out four mobian-sized targets drop down and give me 865,309 push ups!" the Robot Master demanded. (24)

"Okay, so we're facing an insane drill sergeant," Blues noted wrily as the enemy robots began to do exactly as ordered. Or at least tried to. It was hard for the ones without arms to do push ups.

"Did I say you could speak, maggot?!" the Robot Master demanded. "There is no room for weakness in this robot's army!"

"So, what? You're going to make us drop and do pushups?" Quint folded his arms defiantly. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I'm Tank Man, and I'm just going to plain drop you!" the robot declared as he aimed all four of his cannons at them and fired.

"Uh-oh..." Rock slowed his run suddenly as he spotted the change in his quarry.

"What?" Sonic asked, reluctantly letting the members of Team Dark overtake him in their own pursuit.

"Bass, Treble, and Metal Sonic just stopped running," Rock noted as he skidded to a halt behind the members of Team Dark who had also realized the change and refrained from charging straight into a potential trap.

"Alright, Bass!" Shadow demanded. "Time for answers!"

"Very well," the black and gold robot replied calmly, flanked silently by the other two units. "I have concluded that it is most unsporting for all of you to keep getting reinforcements. So..."

There was a rumbling as a battalion of tanks being driven by yellow Sniper Joes burst into the clearing from behind the speaker.

"Oh, great..."

"...I called in a few of my own."

"Okay, this just got a lot more interesting..." Rouge took a ready stance.

"Adjusting combat protocols for target rich environment," Omega intoned.

"Miss Sally!" Cream called out from an outcropping nearby. "Is this what you're looking for?"

Jumping up to where Cream was perched, Sally saw the object wedged in between a pair of rocks. It was the same weird shimmering not-quite-there material as the other one and... yes, she could just make out a marking that looked like a 'U'.

"That's exactly it, Cream," Sally smiled, prompting the young rabbit to beam proudly. "Good eye. Now let's..."

Sally trailed off as she heard a faint rumbling sound. Before she could puzzle out what it was, both she and Cream were yanked from their perch by their respective partners just in time to avoid something huge bursting out of the rock face and right through where they'd been standing.

"Ohohoho! You're too late!" a voice like Eggman's gloated loudly from the unholy red and yellow spawn of a tank and a centipede that had emerged, clutching the relatively tiny mystery object in its metal mandibles. "My Egg Crawler has it now and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Th-th-that is a *b-big* tank..." Ray gulped nervously as the huge treaded machine bore down on the group. The thing was red and gray, a bit taller than a two-story building, drove on a single wide tank tread, had a main cannon that either Ray or Tails could have crawled inside that emerged just below the first cockpit which contained a yellow Sniper Joe, with another two angled cannons

higher up on the machine just below the top cockpit where another Sniper Joe sat.

"It's funny..." Tails said as he looked the machine over. "All I can really think about is the fact that I can't quite tell if this is more Eggman's style or Wily's..."

The main cannon began glowing as it charged and the four heroes scattered out of the way as a massive yellow burst of energy shot forth.

"Incoming!" Joe called out as a pair of treaded METs fell from above, fired out of the angled cannons.

"I see them!" Roll yelled back and began firing.

"Any ideas?" Silver asked as he and Quint took cover from the latest round of explosions Tank Man's arsenal produced. Nearby, Knuckles and the Proto Man were both huddled behind the latter's shield as they waited for an opening.

"Yes, but unfortunately E-123 Omega isn't here," the robot from the future replied before turning magenta and lime green. When the explosions stopped, he ducked out from behind his cover and fired the Rainbow Beam at the militant Robot Master, the multi-colored laser bursting into a flare of damaging prismatic light when it hit its target.

Unfortunately, Tank Man seemed none the worse for wear from the hit and he returned fire with more explosives and heavy artillery rounds.

"This reminds me of the Mega Egg Tank..." Silver mused as the explosions sounded around them.

"Heh..." Quint smirked. "Yeah, that was the first time we tried..."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Silver grinned.

In the chaos created by the Tank Joes, Rock almost missed it when their actual opponents made a break for it.

"Sonic!"

"I see them!" the blue blur yelled back and used the ricochet from his Homing Attack to begin pursuit, Rock close behind and blasting one of the tanks as he left.

"Don't let them get a–" Shadow cut himself off as one of the tanks moved in front of him and he curled into a Spin Dash to destroy it. Unfortunately, that one moment of lost visual was all his quarry and the duo of blue heroes needed to vanish from sight. "DAMNIT!"

"We'll catch up later!" Rouge reminded as Omega destroyed the last of the tanks. "First we need to mop up the rest of these yellow robots!"

"Then leave it to me!" Shadow growled, needing to vent his frustration. "CHAOS BLAST!"

Gemerl landed on top of the Egg Crawler's cockpit with a resounding boom, causing the mystery object to be dislodged from the machine's mandibles and the tank-centipede to shudder from the repeated abuse it had suffered before collapsing in a smoldering heap.

"Well, that was interesting," NICOLE observed as Sally collected the object and put it away.

"Yes, it was..." Sally agreed. "Especially the fact that whoever was controlling this machine wanted to get ahold of this object."

"Huh?" Cream blinked in confusion. "Isn't it Eggman?"

"Unlikely," NICOLE replied, thinking of the space war between Eggman and Wily's fleets right now. "Dr. Eggman is currently... otherwise occupied."

"That *is* interesting," Gemerl agreed. "Though who would pretend to be–"

"CHAO-CHAO-CHAO!" Cheese cried out suddenly, pointing at the downed Egg Crawler.

"Oh my gosh!" Cream gasped as she turned to see the pseudo cockpit rise out of the wreck to reveal that it was actually a container holding several captive chao inside. It sped off the moment it cleared the wreck and Cream took off after it a moment later, Cheese hot on her trail.

"Farewell, your highness, ma'am," Gemerl bowed curtly to Sally and NICOLE. "Best of luck."

"...What happened to sticking together?" NICOLE wondered as the android sped off after his young charge.

"Cute chao in peril happened," Sally sighed as she checked the scanner on NICOLE's handheld form to see where the next target was. "Looks like the next signal is pretty far away..."

Knuckles swore as his attempt to strike Tank Man from behind was met with a vicious backhand as the Robot Master, who had been charging at Blues, abruptly braked and reversed direction. He then turned and fired at Blues who had come out from behind his shield to fire his arm cannon and had to hastily abort his attack and dash out of the way.

"You maggots have nothing that can stop me!" Tank Man bellowed as he turned his cannons on Silver... and noticed a distinct absence of Quint.

"How about... Death From Above?" the silver hedgehog smirked.

Tank Man had just enough time for his eyes to widen in realization before the tip of Sakugarne crashed into his back with all the weight of both the jackhammer itself and Quint behind it.

The two yellow Sniper Joes abandoned the tank after the thing had taken too much damage to remain combat capable. Unfortunately for them, the flying duo of Tails and Ray were ready and smashed them well before they landed.

"Well?" Roll asked when the dust had settled. "I understand you two are also investigating the missing chao? You want to come with us?"

"Thank you, but no," Joe replied before Ray could say anything. "This tank remains relatively intact and is clearly designed for Joe model interfacing. It may have some information, so we will remain here and investigate it. You go ahead."

"Okay," Tails shrugged. "If you insist."

"Interesting look," Blues commented on the dark army green and gunmetal gray of Quint's armor after the robot from the future had copied Tank Man's weapon.

"I don't decide the colors," Quint replied, his armor's coloration returning to normal.

"Still no leads on the Master Emerald," Knuckles sighed. "Where the hell is it?"

"No idea," Quint replied. "Tank Man's databanks don't have any record of it, but that may not mean anything. Nega may have taken it and simply not told his lieutenants he had it."

"Nega?" Blues asked sharply.

"Didn't we leave him trapped in a card?" Knuckles added.

"We did," Silver nodded. "He apparently got out. Unless you know anyone else that the initials 'EN' might stand for."

"'EN'?" Blues asked.

"These Robot Masters were stolen from Dr. Wily and originally bore the serials of his Special Wily Numbers," Quint informed them. "The SWN series."

"Bass's series," Blues scowled in thought.

"Oh, this just keeps getting better and better..." Knuckles grimaced.

"Yes, but the serial numbers have been overwritten," Silver continued. "To an 'ENN' series."

"Eggman Nega Numbers," Knuckles quickly reached the same conclusion that Silver and Quint had.

"We're going after the rest of the series," Quint declared. "We'll keep you informed if we find anything on the Master Emerald."

"We appreciate that," Blues nodded before he and Knuckles sped off to continue their search.

The black robot tsked to himself as he scanned behind him in case those two blue interlopers were still following. Only to be interrupted by a new set of orders from his master.

The man wanted him to... escort a container of chao back to the base?

Well... he was the master after all.

"New course," he informed his partner and support unit, getting a flash of red eyes and a bark in acknowledgement before changing

direction.

"I can't believe we lost them!" Shadow growled as he raced across the countryside towards a city. At least an industrial one along the general direction that they'd seen the trio of enemy robots head in.

"Lost who?" the voice of Tails piped up as the flying fox, with the Mega Woman in tow, came up alongside Team Dark.

"Bass and Metal Sonic," Rouge informed them with a sigh. "With Treble."

"They went this way?" Roll did a double take before increasing her speed. "Come on Tails!"

"Hey!" Rouge and Shadow yelled together as they also picked up their pace, determined to catch their quarry before anyone else could.

Knuckles and Blues were passing by a huge busted-up husk of a tank when they heard the call.

"Kn-nuckles! Proto M-man! O-over here!" the voice of Ray yelled from a short distance away, waving the two over.

"Hey Ray!" Knuckles grinned as he skidded to a halt in front of the flying squirrel.

"Joe," Blues greeted curtly.

"Project: Blues," Joe acknowledged.

"What's up?" Knuckles asked, shrugging off the staring contest between the two robots. Blues had always been... a bit overly formal around Joe. And wasn't inclined to share why. Maybe it was the fact that they both carried shields, or that they were developed for the

military, or that Blues was technically Joe's prototype... Okay... Yeah, he'd probably not want to talk about that either if it was him.

"We have gained intel that our foe has an underwater outpost a short distance from here," Joe informed them. "We don't know what he might be holding there, but–"

"–w-we think he m-m-might be holding chao c-c-captive there!" Ray finished.

Knuckles and Blues exchanged a glance before the Echidna voiced what they were both considering. "Or maybe the Master Emerald..."

"Okay," Sally checked the readings again, "if we stay on this course, we should be there in–what's that noise?"

NICOLE paused and perked her holographic ears up. "Uncertain, due to dopplering, but whatever it is is approaching f–"

BOOM!

The shockwave as what appeared to be a bright blue and cyan comet rocketed past them threw both Sally and NICOLE off their feet.

"After her!" a warbled voice was heard over the ringing in Sally's ears and she shook her disorientation off to see Silver and Quint race past. "Don't let her get away!"

Looking at the handheld form of NICOLE again and the readings displayed, Sally reached the conclusion that whoever the comet had been was headed for their target. With a glance and a nod, both she and NICOLE raced after Silver and Quint.

Cream, Cheese, and Gemerl raced after the pod of capture chao as fast as they could, and it seemed like they were getting closer to it.

Any moment now, and either Cream or Gemerl would be able to–

"–transport mode!" a voice ordered and a black and purple canine robot shot for the pod out of nowhere, transforming as it went into a set of rocket boosters that attached to the pod and flared to life, sending the captured chao shooting off even faster than before.

"NO/CHAO!" Cream and Cheese shouted in dismay, getting the attention of the black and gold robot and the metal hedgehog that had been with the canine.

"Leave the girl and her guardian," the black and gold robot ordered the metal hedgehog. "We must carry out our master's mission before all else."

"Let those chao go!" Gemerl demanded as the two robots shot off.

"Hey, Gemerl!" the voice of Sonic sounded as the hedgehog, followed by Rock Light in his Mega Man armor, skidded to a halt next to them. "You guys seen Bass and Metal Sonic come this way?"

"Think so. They just–"

"THEY TOOK THE CHAO!" Cream wailed. "Please mister Rock, mister Sonic! Help us get them back!"

"Okay, okay!" Sonic waved frantically, trying to calm the distraught rabbit while Rock patted her shoulder comfortingly. "Just point us in their direction!"

Tails and Roll were racing Team Dark through an industrial complex overrun with robots of both Eggman and Wily design, leaving a swath of destroyed machinery in their wake, when they entered a room filled with bright neon lights that looked like they belonged in Casinopolis.

"Ohohohohoho!" the voice of Eggman sounded over the speakers as a cube in the center of the room containing the numbers one through nine on each face lit up and began to randomize the numerals while the giant roulette wheel they were all standing on began to spin and a red machine with flame decals lowered itself from the ceiling. "Come one, come all to the game of a lifetime! Place your bets against the mighty Egg Dealer and see if your luck holds out!"

'I am so glad that Ray had these rebreathers on him,' Knuckles thought as the four swam for the underwater outpost. Knuckles's own had all broken through one method or another, much like most of his equipment. But then, his usual lifestyle tended to lead to greater amounts of wear and tear than manufacturers tended to expect.

Knuckles glanced over to Ray and saw the flying squirrel gesture to an entrance and convey a few more signals about how he and Joe would breach the entrance with explosives while Knuckles and Blues swam in as the first strike team. It was a pretty good plan an–

"INTRUDER DETECTED," a mechanical voice sounded as red lights flared to life on the outpost. "EGG JELLYFISH PF-1407A Z0/1E DEPLOYING."

Knuckles sighed a cloud of bubbles as a vaguely jelly-fish looking metal construct with red lights and the glowing red orb on top encased in some sort of clear bubble-like material emerged from the outpost and began shooting red energy balls and green lasers in their direction.

"Why is she headed out over a lake?" Silver wondered as he and Quint continued chasing the female robot that had buzzed them earlier. And by buzzed, he meant knocked them flat with a well-timed sonic boom.

"What the hell was that all about?! Do you just run around breaking the sound barrier whenever you please?"

"Break the sound barrier?! Pfft... Boring! Atmospheres are so limiting after all..."

"What's your game, lady?"

"I'm the Comet Woman, buster, and you'll have to catch me to find out!"

The robot woman had primarily teal armor done in a bikini style on her torso over her black underframe. Her teal boots were trimmed with spikey magenta additions and her giant starburst helmet, teal with magenta forehead decoration and earrings, added a few feet to her height. The thruster at the back of her helmet blazed a giant bright blue and cyan energy flare that looked like it was a massive head of hair given its position. (25)

And she had been leaving them all in the dust so far. Any power they had to keep up was because the robot woman was letting them.

"Be careful, Sally," Silver heard from nearby, reminding him of the other two that had joined the chase. "She must have something planned."

"I know, NICOLE, bu–" Sally's reply was cut off as the lake in front of the four began freezing at a rapid pace, solidifying nicely by the time any of them put their feet on it.

"She's stacking the terrain in her favor," Quint noted with a scowl.

"How nice of you to notice!" Comet Woman smirked as she landed on the ice in the middle of the lake, standing straight before putting a hand on her hips and thrusting them forward suggestively while training her buster arm on the four as they slid to a halt and prepared themselves. "Try to keep up, slowpokes!"

"Ba*skrsh*, do you have my package?"

"Of course, master," the black and gold robot answered. "We have what you desire and are personally escort–"

"SONIC SHOT!"

A blue Homing Attack wreathed in energy slammed into his partner before resolving into the blue hedgehog mobian pursuing them and the two began to duel furiously. A moment later, a barrage of missiles joined the assault, forcing the black and gold robot to defend himself.

"You give those chao back right now, you meanies!" a young mobian rabbit demanded as she flew up into his face.

"The battlefield is no place for young ladies," he declared, reaching out to grab the rabbit's ears and hold her firm before kicking her hard in the torso to stun her and swatting away that annoying chao that followed her. "You might get hurt."

"Cream!" a black and yellow gizoid design yelled in alarm before charging at him on his jet boosters. Behind him, the blue robot Mega Man trained his arm cannon in the direction of the rabbit's captor.

"Crash!" the black and gold robot ordered his support unit. The canine attached to the objective barked in acknowledgement before unleashing a barrage of missiles at the incoming hostiles, forcing them to abort their assault.

"You! Big!" the cry caused him to look at his captive just in time to spot her feet slamming into his face. "MEANIE!" (26)

The shock of the impact caused his grip on her ears to slacken, allowing the young rabbit to bound off of his face and perform a homing attack on the container his support unit was carrying, cracking it open and releasing the chao inside.

"Report Ba*skzzt*!" his master's voice sounded in his head. "What is going on?!"

"Apologies, master," he reported, forming his arm cannon and training it on the young rabbit and the escaping chao. "That which you desire has temporarily escaped. I shall personally see to its retrieval."

He opened fire, only for the gizoid to interpose himself and deflect all of the shots with a forcefield.

"We gotta get out of here, Cream! It's too dangerous for you!" the gizoid shouted, prompting the young rabbit and the chao to all take off at high speed, the gizoid following in rear guard position.

"I regret to report that what you desire has escaped, master," the black and gold robot reported as he was forced to defend an assault by the Mega Man, preventing him from pursuing his quarry.

"No matter," his master stated. "I have enough for my purposes now. I have a new objective for you. I will contact you later with coordinates, so in the meantime I expect you to keep my enemies occupied!"

"By your command," he acknowledged, relaying the new orders to his partner and support unit.

"Damnit, Bass!" the Mega Man cried out as the black and gold robot moved to disengage. "What's gotten into you?!"

He simply gazed at the so-called 'blue bomber' as he was joined by his support unit (now free of the empty capture pod) and his partner and the so-called 'blue blur' joined his own partner in glaring at them.

"Follow if you wish to know," he stated with a superior smile before taking off once more.

"Bingo!" Roll grinned as she shot another of the numbered blocks the Egg Dealer had been dropping, causing another light on the central cube to illuminate, and a row to begin flashing.

The Egg Dealer, which had been charging its laser weapon up, began sparking and sputtering before losing altitude where Team Dark readily dogpiled it and tore the annoying machine to shreds.

"I hate having my time wasted," Shadow's eye twitched as he eyed the machine's remains.

"Sorry everyone," Tails looked up from where he'd been hacking the central cube for information. "Looks like this was just an elaborate trap of some sort. Well, that and a tracker for... Something. Doesn't say what, but it indicates that whatever it is has been detected nearby."

"Hmm..." Roll mused on the information. "Sounds worth investigating."

"Good luck with that," Rouge waved dismissively. "We've got a wayward teammate to track down and beat some sense into."

"Give him a few extra whacks for me, would you?" Roll asked. "There's no excuse for being a part of this idiocy."

"Your terms are acceptable," Omega intoned.

NICOLE braced herself on the ice as Comet Woman shot some sort of blue energy at her from close range, and blinked when no impact registered. Instead, the shot split into two energy orbs that orbited NICOLE while Comet Woman engaged the others.

While the holo-lynx watched the orbs in confusion, trying to figure out their purpose, Silver decided to circumvent the terrain by levitating over it with his psychic powers.

"Give it up, Comet Woman! There's no way you'll ev–"

BOOM!

Comet Woman's blazing charge cracked the sound barrier and slammed into Silver's psychokinetic aura with the force of a runaway train, sending the hedgehog rocketing off across the frozen lake while Comet Woman came to a halt and turned towards her remaining opponents.

"And then there were two..." the Robot Master smirked at them.

"Two?" Sally puzzled as she struggled to keep her footing on the slippery ice. "What do you–NICOLE!"

The orbs orbiting NICOLE had halted suddenly and turned bright cyan. An instant later and they converged on the holo-lynx from either side, tearing through her solid light form with ease.

"NICOLE!" Sally cried again, watching her friend dissolve into thin air.

"I am fine, Sally," NICOLE's voice sounded from her handheld. "But my holographic body will need time to recompile."

"Time you don't have!" Comet Woman declared as she fired another of her blue energy shots at Sally, who grit her teeth as it split and began orbiting her like it had NICOLE.

Quint hastily summoned Sakugarne to block as Comet Woman burst forwards in her blazing energy charge, and successfully deflected the bulk of the impact away from him even as it sent him sliding back out of control on the ice. Digging his large feet in, Quint spun around and turning army green and gunmetal grey before firing the two tank rounds and an arcing impact explosive of the Tank Arsenal at his recovering opponent.

Comet Woman yelled in pain from the impacts and fell to the icy lake surface in a tumble. "And then... there was one..." she declared before rocketing at Quint again.

Quint glanced to the side to see the orbiting energy around Sally halt and turn bright cyan, but before the orbs could converge, Sally dashed out from between them and slashed her energy wrist blades at Comet Woman's side, sending the Robot Master off course and allowing Quint to take another shot with the Tank Arsenal.

Comet Woman screamed again from the impacts and turned to face her remaining opponents with a look of fury, only to take a third barrage head-on. She did not get up from that one.

"Well, that was intense," Sally stretched once certain that their opponent wasn't getting back up. As she did, Quint stepped forward to copy Comet Woman's weapon, his armor turning cyan and white as he did.

"Indeed it was," Quint agreed.

"Did anyone get the number of that truck?" Silver asked in a punch-drunk slur as he wobblingly levitated back. "I haven't been hit that hard since the Egg Boxer..."

"Heh..." Quint snorted at the memory. "Where was Little Mac when we needed him?"

"Little Mac?" Sally blinked questioningly.

"Oh, Silver loved stories about this fictional wallaby boxer back when he was a kid," (27) Quint jerked his thumb at the hedgehog, who was frantically gesturing for Quint to stop talking. "Used to dress up as him all the time. Hold on, I'll send you an image file."

"Nooooo...!" Silver moaned in embarrassed dismay.

"Silver," NICOLE declared as she received the file and projected a mini-hologram of a young Silver in black boxing shorts with green trim, green boxing gloves, what was either a genuine black eye or a good makeup job, and a childish grin. "I must conclude that you were adorable."

"Agreed," Sally nodded with a smirk. "Do you have any other pictures?"

"Sure," Quint smirked evilly while Silver shook his head in frantic denial. "Give me a minute to send them over before we part ways."

"I think we can spare that," NICOLE agreed in a teasing tone as Silver buried his face in his hands. (28)

"Well, this was a bust..." Knuckles sighed from where he was looking over the command terminal in the underwater outpost. There was no information on the Master Emerald at all. Just some sort of homing beacon. At least the Egg Jellyfish thing had been a decent warm-up.

"For you, perhaps," Joe replied. "For us, it is another lead to follow."

"Y-y-yeah!" Ray agreed. "There's an-nother of these in-n-n th-the desert nearby!"

"Good luck with that, then," Blues wished them. "We'll continue our search elsewhere."

"And we will contact you if our investigation turns up anything on the location of the Master Emerald," Joe promised.

Rouge wanted to back out the moment she'd stepped into the next production plant Team Dark was planning to hit, she really did. But it was too late. Omega had already seen the interior, which meant there was no stopping him. There was only trying desperately to contain the damage.

The entire things was filled with clear tubes containing a substance whose appearance set Rouge's hair on end. Combined with the way the tanks were labeled, it could only be trinitroglycerine.

As if to confirm her suspicions, some of the liquid dripped out of pipes hanging overhead and exploded the moment it hit the floor.

"I have found the promised land," E-123 Omega intoned with the closest thing to awe Rouge had ever heard from him.

"Walkers help us all," Shadow prayed. (29)

"Hey Aunt Sally!" Tails greeted as he and Roll came up alongside Sally and NICOLE. "What brings you this way?"

"Tracking partial Zone portal signatures," Sally replied. "The ones leading to the final Chaos Emerald."

"Interesting..." Roll mused as NICOLE sent her the relevant coordinates. "We're headed to the same spot... Looks like our latest robot enthusiast is looking for the same things you are..."

"Then we must make haste," NICOLE nodded.

"Yo Sonic! Rock!" Knuckles called out as he spotted the blue hedgehog and the blue robot and changed course to match theirs.

"Hey Knux!" Sonic grinned back at the hedgehog. "What's up?"

"Brother," Blues nodded curtly to Rock, getting one in return. "We are investigating the disappearance of the Master Emerald."

"Again?" Sonic laughed. "Man, you really need to get some better locks for that thing, Knux!"

"Yeah, yeah... What are you two doing?"

"Chasing down Bass and Metal Sonic," the blue blur grinned back. "Wanna come? First to catch them gets to ask the questions!"

"Sounds good to me!"

"Okay," Silver spoke shakily as he did his best to get his nerves under control. "I can handle a nitroglycerin plant. That's fine. One that drips nitro all over the place and stores easily broken containers in inconvenient places? I can handle that too. Exploding chicken robots are weird, but hardly new either. But why are there lakes of nitro in here and why do they have platforms that blast you upwards at the slightest pressure?! And how do they manage to do that without setting off the rest of it?!"

Quint made to shrug in response when someone else replied.

"Because it is the promised land of destruction," the monotone of Omega answered with bizarrely reverent undertones.

"Okay, that's really creepy," Silver made a note to keep his distance from the walking engine of destruction.

"Welcome to our life," Rouge sighed as she and Shadow joined their teammate.

"This is going to end in a huge explosion, isn't it?" Quint asked rhetorically. (30)

"It shall be glorious," Omega promised.

"Do you think the missing chao are in there Mister Ray?" Cream asked the Chaotix member as they and their robot companions overlooked some manner of outpost in the desert.

"I-i-it's p-possible," Ray stuttered in reply.

"Regardless, it should provide additional information regarding the current situation," Joe added.

"Stick close to me, Cream," Gemerl told the young rabbit. "We–"

"MMOOOOOOO!" the sound from behind caused all four to whip around and spot a huge mechanical bull bearing down on them. With a trio of screams, both Ray, Cream, and Cheese took off like shots with Joe and Gemerl hot on their tails an instant later.

"Ohohohoho!" the synthesized voice of Eggman laughed. "That's it! Run from my Egg Bull you simpletons!"

The black and gold robot scowled as he turned to meet his pursuers. Their dedication was commendable, he supposed, but it was beginning to grate being the target of such.

"I begin to tire of your constant pursuit," he glared at the four facing him, his partner and support unit taking up flanking positions.

"Yeah?" the blue hedgehog pointed accusingly. "Well we're getting tired of you running away!"

"Tell us where the Master Emerald is and maybe we we'll leave you in one piece!" the hotheaded red echidna pounded his fists together.

"Very well, then! You leave us no choice!" the black and gold robot formed both of his arms into busters and trained them on his opponents. "Destroy them Metal S–!"

The robotic hedgehog's eyes flashed and he let out a loud mechanical sound in acknowledgement that drowned out the rest of his name as the black and gold robot continued his orders.

"Crash!"

"Scatter!" the red and gray robot ordered as he brought up his shield while the blue and cyan one formed an arm cannon in response and began to dart in the other direction.

The metal hedgehog and the robotic canine darted forwards to meet the charges of the two mobians even as the black and gold robot himself fired on his opponents repeatedly.

The containers of trinitroglycerin barring the inner chamber of the production plant blew apart after barely being grazed by one of Omega's bullets and the five warriors entered.

Inside waited a purple and orange robot with glaring eyes, arms that ended in orange-tipped ovular nozzles, and had five clear tubes of what had to be trinitroglycerin stuck into his body. The largest from his bucket-shaped head, one on each shoulder, and strangely one on the front of each foot.

"Well, look what the chicken bombs dragged in!" the Robot Master laughed. "Target practice!"

"Preparing to begin glorious dance of destruction once you identify yourself," Omega declared.

"I'm Trinitro Man!" (31) the robot supplied with a slightly crazed look in his eyes. "And I know all about each of you! Here!" he leveled his nozzle-arms at the five. "Have a blast!"

BA-BA-BOOM!

"Here we are," Sally informed the others as they approached a boulder. "The reading is coming from inside this..."

Sally trailed off as the boulder began to lift off of the ground. After a few moments of everyone tensing and staring, the boulder had lifted enough to reveal the prongs of a forklift underneath it.

"Oh, *lovely* ..." Roll grumbled and formed an arm cannon.

"Are you certain that's nec–" NICOLE was cut off as the forklift's tongs suddenly accelerated upwards, thrusting the boulder in a nearly vertical arc that would bring it back down on top of their heads. As the four heroes scattered, they noted the Egg Pawn in the driver's seat.

"A *forklift* ?" Tails boggled as the boulder crashed back into the vacated area and broke apart, the glint of a cyan object shimmering in the rubble. "Seriously?" (32)

"Condescend all you want," Roll replied as she fired on the machine, "I'm having bad flashbacks to the time Wily weaponized Mega City International Airport. It took over a dozen Loops before I could enter baggage claim without expecting it to try and kill me."

Since entering the trinitroglycerin plant, Silver had seen more explosions than any other three Eggman (Nega or otherwise) invasions combined. *Including* the ones involving anything with the name 'Egg Bomber'. The next time he encountered an explosive-happy opponent at this level, he was going to seriously consider just blowing their whole complex and to hell with the consequences. As it was, he was doing his best to remain unexploded as Trinitro Man hovered on his foot-mounted nitro jets (which explained the tubes on his feet) and sprayed pure trinitroglycerin at them, creating a rather literal shower of explosions.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! ARE WE HAVING A BLAST YET?!"

BA-BA-BOOM!

Rouge had taken a look at the first volley and decided the best place for her to potentially survive the fight was hiding behind Omega. Shadow was doing his best to counterattack without getting caught in the blasts, but openings were few and far between.

Quint had tried to defend the initial barrage with Sakugarne, and it had nearly gotten both the robot from the future *and* his jackhammer support unit blown up, forcing Quint to dismiss Sakugarne and begin trying weapons. The Tank Arsenal had been detonated prematurely by Trinitro Man's blasts, same with the Yo-Yo Cutter, and the Comet Dash had only served to get Quint almost blown up again.

"HERE! HAVE SOME MORE!"

BA-BA-BOOM!

And Omega... was just watching the whole thing raptly. "So beautiful..."

"Take this!" Quint yelled as he tried the final Master Weapon in his arsenal, the Rainbow Beam. The multicolored laser hit Trinitro Man and burst into a prismatic corona underneath which several miniature explosions burst from the seams in Trinitro Man's armor.

"GAH!"

"It's over!" Quint charged the Robot Master as Shadow and Silver both struck with Homing Attacks and grabbed the explosive robot, turning purple and orange as he copied Trinitro Man's weapon. "Let's see how you like–"

Quint paused and looked down to where both of Trinitro Man's trinitroglycerin nozzles were planted right in his torso.

"You first," the Robot Master chuckled before Quint was engulfed in explosions.

"QUINT!" Silver cried in alarm as the robot from the future and his opponent both flew apart, trailing smoke.

"Damnit, Omega!" Rouge yelled. "Will you do something already?!"

"Very well," Omega replied, forming his hands into chain guns. "Shadow, you have the purple Chaos Emerald recovered from

Casinopolis, correct?"

"Uh, yes?" Shadow confirmed.

"Be ready to evacuate all allied units then," Omega informed him as he took aim at the recovering Trinitro Man and targeted his trinitroglycerin tubes.

Shadow's eyes widened as Omega shot the tubes directly, causing cracks to appear in them. Hastily, he gathered the Chaos Force before Omega's shots ruptured the tubes and the inevitable happened. (33)

dakka-dakka-dakka-dakka-da–

crack-cra–

"CHAOS CONTROL!"

SHAKARAKABABABABOOMOOM!

"Tell us, Bass," Blues shouted as he deflected shots with his shield, "how did Eggman Nega reprogram you?!"

"Nega?" Rock blinked in surprise as Sonic traded Homing Attack with the robotic hedgehog nearby and Knuckles evaded missile fire from the robotic canine. "You mean Eggman Nega?!"

"Simpletons," the black and gold robot scoffed as he kept firing on both of his opponents. "As if my master would ever have need to reprogram me into his service! I am proud to be the emissary of his will! You will fall this day and my master shall reign supreme over– GAH!"

Rock had fired a charged shot that was evaded, but Blues's following shield charge had caught their opponent head on and knocked him to the ground where Rock proceeded to blast him with a Hard

Knuckle to the abdomen, forcing the black and gold robot to double over as he was sent tumbling along the ground.

"Sonic!" Knuckles warned as he flung the robotic canine into the melee between living and mechanical hedgehogs, prompting the living one to duck down and allow the thrown robot to collide with his opponent.

"Ba*sshhhrrss*!" A screechy voice sounded from the black and gold robot. "What are you do*krk*? Report back immediately!"

"Hey Nega," Sonic greeted. "I'm afraid your borrowed stooges are a little tied up at the moment."

"My apologies, master," the black and gold robot got to his feet. "I will rectify the situation immediately."

"Never mind that!" Nega's high pitched voice yelled. "I'm sending you your new objective! Forget the targets and acquire it at all costs! I need it so I can use the Master Emerald t–"

"I KNEW IT!" Knuckles roared. "WHERE DID YOU TAKE THE MASTER EMERALD, YOU POMPOUS PIECE OF–"

"THAT'S AN ORDER–" Nega's screech managed to drown out Knuckles's roar.

But the black and gold robot was already speeding off, his companions in tow.

"We'll follow them," Rock nodded to his brother and Knuckles. "You two see if you can find where he's keeping the Master Emerald.

"We will," Blues nodded back. "Good luck!"

"I don't think I like robotic livestock," Gemerl dusted his hands off as he jumped from the crumpled form of the Egg Bull, it's head caved in

from the impact of Gemerl's final attack.

"Yes, that was a load of bull," Joe agreed as he began working on the outpost's door.

"Language!" Cream scolded the green robot, Cheese mimicking her scolding finger as she did.

"...Did I say something inappropriate?" the green robot paused in his work to ponder the accusation.

" *I* certainly didn't hear anything of the sort," Gemerl blinked in Cream's direction.

"You mean it's not?" Cream blinked in confusion.

"B-b-better ch-check with your m-m-mom," Ray suggested.

"That was much harder than a forklift really should have been," Sally noted as she began removing rubble from over the shimmering object she was there to retrieve.

"Agreed," NICOLE nodded looking at the wreckage that used to be a weaponized forklift and an Egg Pawn.

"What is that, anyway?" Tails asked as he observed the way the object shimmered in and out of view, as well as the strange 'O' marking on it.

"It's apparently part of a Zone portal to where the last Chaos Emerald currently is," Sally informed them.

"It reminds me of a Yoku block," Roll mused curiously before stiffening and facepalming with a groan. "I *really* hope it doesn't mean what I think it means, but I don't think any of us is that lucky. Oh, this is going to be annoying as *hell* ..."

"What?" Tails asked.

"Glorious..." Omega gazed at the still-exploding building. (34)

"I'm just glad you got us out of there," Silver thanked Shadow. "That could have been messy."

"Probably," the dark hedgehog snorted. "It was still another dead end..."

"I wish you luck in finding your teammate," Quint nodded. "Until we meet again."

"Hopefully under less explosive circumstances," Rouge quipped.

"S-sorry Cream," Ray apologized. "L-l-looks like th-there's no chao here..."

"It's okay..." Cream moped a bit. "You found what you wanted, right?"

"We did," Joe nodded. "This is indeed another beacon for something, and there's another beacon atop a nearby canyon. We will be investigating it shortly."

"Do not worry, Cream," Gemerl comforted the moping rabbit. "I'm sure we'll find the missing chao."

"Chao-chao," Cheese agreed.

"About that," Joe spoke up, "There is a storage facility outside a nearby city that has been receiving a great deal of traffic from the armies being mobilized. It may be a location where chao have been taken for further transport."

"Really?" Cream perked up immediately. "Thank you! Come on Gemerl! We have to go save those chao!"

"Hmm..." Tails frowned as he adjusted his Miles Electric device.

"What is it?" Roll asked, dusting her hands off from the latest squad of robots to try and ambush them.

"I'm picking up some strange signals here..." Tails mused. "Can't really figure out what it's about... Maybe if I could get some altitude for a clearer signal?"

"How about that tower over there?" Roll pointed to a nearby city skyline, one possessing a large metal tower that looked like the first cousin twice removed (35) of the Eiffel Tower.

"Perfect!"

Sally was hot on the trail of the last partial portal reading when she and NICOLE nearly ran straight into Sonic and Rock. A quick adjustment and the four were soon speeding alongside each other.

"Fancy running into you two here," Sonic grinned. "What's up?"

"We're closing in on the last of a series of objects which should lead to where the last of the Chaos Emeralds is located, after counting the one that was stolen by parties unknown and the one in Team Dark's possession," NICOLE informed them.

"Huh... Maybe that's what Bass and Metal Sonic are after now...?" Sonic wondered.

"Metal Sonic?" Sally fought the surge of adrenaline the second name triggered. She'd mostly gotten over her fears, enough to act when needed, but they weren't the kind of fears that ever really went away completely. "What will it take to keep him dead?"

"And why is Bass with him?" NICOLE pondered.

"Because it's not Bass," Rock replied simply, cutting off Sonic's answer. (36)

"Wait, what?" Sonic did a double-take. "But... who the hell else looks like that?"

"Holographic disguise, a Bass-model copy robot, something else, I'm not sure," Rock frowned. "I just know that's not Bass."

"Explain, please," NICOLE prompted.

"He's too polite," Rock answered. "He hasn't been truly rude or crass once yet, or even used so much as a single swear word. He's too calm and obedient, not a trace of Bass's arrogance or rebellious nature. He's also retreated from battle without complaint, without suffering significant injury, sometimes without being ordered to, and practically every version of Bass I've ever encountered won't even consider retreat without at least two of those conditions being met. Plus, we've attacked his support unit, whatever's pretending to be Treble, multiple times and he hasn't flipped out and tried to murder the attacker once. That may be some mute version of Metal Sonic he's with, but that is not Bass."

"Then who is it?" Sonic asked.

"Honestly? I have no clue..."

"You really think we're going to spot Nega's hideout from the top of this tower?" Knuckles asked impatiently as he and Blues stood on the observation deck of the fancy Eiffel Tower knockoff. (37)

"You have any better ideas?" Blues asked him.

"Does beating it out of Nega's robots count?" Knuckles asked with a grin.

"Not when they apparently know less than we do."

"Ok-kay, Joe," Ray stuttered. "Th-there's the place with th-he third b-b-beacon."

"Yes, and it seems well guarded," Joe replied, looking out over the small army of robots defending the installation at the edge of the canyon. Most were the standard fodder of both Eggman's and Wily's usual choices, but there were also several tank-sized scorpion robots. "We will need to be carefu–"

"Care is for worthless consumer models," a voice intoned, causing Joe to stiffen and turn to see the three members of G.U.N.'s Team Dark nearby, looking out over the army with expressions that spoke of a burning need to destroy something.

"Sorry boys," Rouge smiled in their direction. "But if there's any information to be had in there, then it belongs to us!"

"So much for doing this quietly..." Joe emulated a sigh as all three members of Team Dark raced forwards and began demolishing robots at a feverish pace.

"A glue factory..." Quint deadpanned. "This is where Nega's next commander is holed up?"

"Seems like it," Silver shrugged. "So I guess we should head in and chec–"

"HELP! I'M STUCK!" a young girl wailed from inside. Quint and Silver didn't even bother exchanging glances before dashing in.

Inside, the factory hummed with activity, globs of wet glue pulsing through pipes and coating the floor alike. Silver immediately used his psychokinesis to levitate himself over the sticky hazard while Quint called in Sakugarne to pogo over it, the battle jackhammer's point providing insufficient surface area to be caught in the adhesive. They soon came upon a young rabbit mobian crying over the fact that her feet were stuck, a chao pulling fruitlessly on her dress, and a gizoid-

model robot that was frantically attempting to figure out how to pull hard enough to free her, but not hard enough to hurt her.

She was suddenly enveloped in a teal-colored energy as Silver grasped her with his psychokinesis and freed her from her sticky situation by simply detaching the adhesive she was stuck in from the floor rather than the rabbit herself.

"Thank you," the gizoid, Gemerl according to Quint's database of notable combatants, offered as he freed himself from the glue by simply activating boot-mounted jets on his feet and electing to hover in the air to avoid further encounters with the stuff. As he did so, the aura around the young rabbit went to work cleaning the adhesive off of her feet.

"Yes, thank you Mr..." the rabbit girl, Cream if Quint recalled correctly. She'd been on Team Acorn at the EX World Grand Prix.

"Silver," the so-colored hedgehog answered. "And this is Quint, and together we are... the Blue Shade Brothers!"

Cream gasped and looked sparkly-eyed at the proclamation, prompting Quint to turn and look at the hovering Silver who, yes indeed, had donned a pair of green-framed visor-like aviator shades tinted the same color as Quint's own helmet-mounted shades.

"I cannot believe you still have those," Quint fought the urge to facepalm. Silver had, when younger, gone through a phase where he'd tried to dress like Quint. It had taken a great deal of prompting to get the psychokinetic to stop emulating his 'big brother'.

"Are you super heroes?" Cream asked, wide-eyed and Quint noted that she now seemed to be airborne under her own power, apparently by flapping her large ears. And then she gasped in realization. "You must be! Who else would a princess like Elise have on her team?! Please, Mr. Blue Shade Brothers! You must help us rescue the captured chao that were brought here!"

"Chao-chao!" the girl's chao companion pleaded.

"Is yours always like this?" Gemerl asked Quint in a low voice.

"No, he's... *sometimes* sensible," Quint replied at a similar volume. "Yours?"

"This is pretty normal for her."

"Hello, brother," Roll greeted from atop Tango's jet form as she and Tails landed on the tower's observation deck. As she dismounted, her feline companion teleported back to Light Labs until called again. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Roll," Blues nodded in response.

"Hey Tails!" Knuckles grinned. "What's up?"

"Well, I've been picking up some odd transmissions recently and we came up here to try and get a clearer signal," Tails explained holding up his Miles Electric. "If I can just figure out what it is, then mayb–"

The tower shuddered violently all of a sudden and the four exchanged glances before running over to the edge of the observation balcony and looking down.

Attached to the tower was a huge straight gear-toothed device with jacob's ladders at either end that arced with electricity and a huge metal crab attached to the gear-toothed middle section, presumably for movement.

"Ohohohoho!" Eggman's voice sounded from the machine. "I've got you now you troublemakers! Feel the wrath of my Egg Crab!"

"Egg Crab?!" Roll yelled back incredulously. "Do you seriously think I don't know one of Wily's designs when I see it?! Who the hell are you really?!"

"Give it up, Nega!" Knuckles roared down. "We know it's really you!"

"How did yo–" the voice suddenly became higher pitched and screechier before clearing its throat and continuing in Dr. Eggman's usual tone. "I mean... whatever could you be talking about?"

"Nega?!" Tails started in surprise. "I thought you left him trapped in a card!"

"We did," Blues stated. "He apparently got better."

"Oh for the love of..." the voice gave up pretenses and returned to the higher-pitched tone. "Just die already!"

Arcs of electricity began racing up the tower's struts from the machine's jacob's ladder ends and the four heroes leaped off to duel with the electrical war machine.

"Okay..." Gemerl commented as the group finally entered the innermost chamber of the glue factory, finally away from the sticky adhesive coating almost every surface so those that had been flying could finally stand and rest their modes of propulsion, and stared at what met them. "Why is there a skate park in here?"

"So that I, Glue Man, can grind intruders onto the ground!" came the response from the other end of the giant bowl-shaped depression in the floor.

"What in...?" Quint puzzled as he took in the self-proclaimed Glue Man.

The Robot Master had deep blue armor with two red orbs on his chest and gray trim, including a gray dispenser nozzle on one arm that looked squeezed in the middle and a matching one on top of his bucket-shaped head. He also had gray wheels on his feet, clearly meant to take advantage of the bowl-shaped arena for increased

mobility. All in all, he seemed to be trying to take advantage of two completely different thematic elements. (38)

"What have you done with the chao?" Cream demanded immediately.

"Chao-chao!" Cheese joined her, shaking one of his tiny arms at the robot in accusation.

"Those things?" Glue Man blinked. "I pack them up and send them to the boss man. Don't worry, I think there's still room on the last transport for that one there.

"Don't you dare hurt Cheese!" Cream grabbed the chao and hugged him protectively. "You better let those chao go, you big meanie!"

"Those chao aren't going anywhere except to Boss Nega," Glue Man sniffed arrogantly, plunging his arm into the floor and appearing to suck up a large amount of viscous liquid from an access port in the floor at his feet. "And you aren't going anywhere at all!"

Glue Man suddenly skated forwards at high speeds down the bowl and back up to the group's side where he launched into a heel-grab that arced over them while aiming his arm-nozzle down. The group scattered as he fired a blob of adhesive at them, but the only real area in the room with any real room to maneuver was the bowl-like depression. Which was exactly where Glue Man wanted them.

"Come on!" Glue Man's grin was audible as he skated back through the depression at high speed, nearly knocking Quint and Silver over as he passed before launching back into the air on the other side in another heel-grab and taking aim at them with his adhesive weapon. "Stick around and play!"

Sonic, Rock, Sally, and NICOLE were fully expecting to have to chase the Bass imposter and the possibly Metal Sonic for a good while yet, so when they found the two just waiting for them, it took a

moment before anyone thought to start slowing down and coming to a halt.

"Hold it right there..." Sonic stopped his demand, trying to think of what to call the black and gold robot before him, "not-Bass!"

"How very clever you must think yourself," 'not-Bass' smiled back arrogantly, flanked by his robot hedgehog partner. The latter's eyes flashed red mockingly as the speaking member of the duo continued. "And how fortunate you are this day. For I am inclined to be generous."

"In what way?" NICOLE demanded.

"If you ladies simply hand over your three pieces of the portal, then you may continue to live."

"Yeah, well, you can take your offer and–"

"Sonic!" Sally hissed before addressing the enemy robot herself. "I appreciate your 'kind' offer, but I'm afraid we can't comply. We need them and the final piece you're after."

"I suppose the sentiment is 'over your dead body' then?" not-Bass inquired, before a wicked smirk crawled up one corner of his mouth and he formed one of his arms into a cannon and his companion flexed clawed metal hands menacingly. "I believe that arrangement is acceptable."

Quint growled as Sakugarne was blasted with a glob of the quick-drying adhesive and stuck to the floor of the bowl depression as the laughing Glue Man zipped by. The skating glue-shooter was too agile for the Tank Arsenal or the Nitro Blast to land a solid hit and the Rainbow Beam had barely scratched his paint job. Silver was having trouble focusing his psychic powers on the ever-mobile Robot Master and Gemerl's missile blasts were being treated like a joke as

Glue Man wove in between the explosives with almost sickening ease.

"Here we go!" Glue Man laughed as his latest jump took him all the way to the ceiling where the nozzle in his head attached and began siphoning globs of adhesive while the Robot Master took aim at them with his arm-nozzle. "Glue Spread!"

"Eek!" Cream yelped as she tripped over one of the glue blocks that had been left by earlier shots, leaving her prone for the attack.

"Chao!" Cheese cried in alarm and tried fruitlessly to pull the young rabbit to her feet.

"Cream!" Gemerl raced to shield the young rabbit and took the full force of one of the blobs of glue while Quint and Silver evaded the other two.

"Haha!" Glue Man laughed at the immobile gizoid and the fearful mobian girl as he dropped down and sped in for a body slam. "Easy pickin–"

With a loud metallic crash, Glue Man was sent skidding to the side and both Gemerl and Cream sighed with relief at the sight of Quint's outstretched leg that he'd kicked the Robot Master with.

"Don't worry," Quint declared. "We'll take care of things."

"Heh..." Silver laughed as he landed next to Quint and took up a defensive stance between the recovering Glue Man and the immobile gizoid. "We should play that song then."

"Only if you tell me where you heard it."

"Use the yo-yo weapon and you've got yourself a deal."

"Sure," Quint shrugged as his armor turned orange and teal. He'd been planning on trying that one next anyway. "Sakugarne, play track."

The battle jackhammer beeped in confirmation where it was stuck to the floor and began playing an upbeat tune. (39)

"No music can defeat me!" Glue Man declared as he shot forth on his skates, firing a blob of glue straight at Silver.

"Oooooh yeeeaaaahhh! Haha!"

Quint let loose with the Yo-Yo Cutter and the bladed 'toy' shredded the glue with ease, allowing Silver a clean avenue to charge forward.

"Now me and my bro, we're takin' care of things!"

Silver met Glue Man's charge with a sliding bicycle kick that planted itself in the robot's chest and vaulted him over the mobian and directly at Quint.

"Went from a pair of jokers to a couple of kings!"

Quint met the flailing Robot Master with a roundhouse kick that sent Glue Man careening off to the side.

"It goes to show you never know just what a shuffle brings!"

Glue Man grabbed the edge of the bowled depression and vaulted himself out in time to avoid the Homing Attack Silver had launched at him.

"Me and my bro, we're takin' care of things!"

And promptly had to do the splits to avoid having his legs chopped off from another Yo-Yo Cutter from Quint as the music changed to a rap tune.

"That's right, we're bros, we're brothers, different father and mother,"

Glue Man narrowed his eyes and charged directly at Quint.

"But don't you diss or slam or slide us, we look after one another!"

He managed to jump over the leg sweep, but took another Homing Attack to the back which left him open to the spinning palm-strike Quint followed with, the robot from the future briefly turning deep blue and peach before returning to the orange and teal color of his selected weapon.

"Cause we're thicker than thieves and we're cooler than kings,"

Quint and Silver grinned at each other and began a complicated fist-bump as Glue Man turned his tumble into momentum and made for the edge of the bowl depression and a vault.

"Oh man, you better believe, we're takin' care of things!"

As the music went back to the original tune, Glue Man launched himself in a high arc over his two opponents, firing a blob of adhesive at Silver's back.

"I'll tell you up front that I've got your back,"

Quint unleashed a Yo-Yo Cutter at the blob headed for Silver while Glue Man took aim at him next.

"And I know that you've got mine,"

Silver unleashed a crescent wave of psychokinetic energy that slammed into Glue Man and forced the shot to go wide.

"As long as we stick together side by side,"

Glue Man landed and glared at the two before sticking his arm-nozzle into the floor at his feet–

"Yo, bro, it's gonna turn out fine,"

–and sucking up massive blobs of glue to reload.

"Yo, bro, it's gonna turn out fine!"

"This is it!" the Robot Master yelled.

"Now me and my bro, we're takin' care of things!"

Glue Man charged down on his skates with a cry of fury, blasting away with his weapon.

"Went from a pair of jokers to a couple of kings!"

Quint unleashed two Yo-Yo Cutters while Silver revved up a Spin Dash. The first tore through the blobs of glue with ease while the second tore along the ground and shredded one of Glue Man's legs, causing him to lose control of his charge.

"It goes to show you never know just what a shuffle brings!"

Silver unleashed his Spin Dash point-blank into Glue Man's chest, sending the robot crashing into the wall from the impact.

"Me and my bro, we're takin' care of things!"

"That was amazing!" Cream cheered as the song ended with the two warriors from the future giving each other a fist-bump and Glue Man didn't get back up.

"Yes," Gemerl added, "very impressive. Now could one of you *please* get me out of this stupid glue?!"

Shots were traded and blows exchanged, but instead of pressing the attack, 'not-Bass' and his robotic hedgehog partner simply kept disengaging after every pass. It was almost hit-and-run tactics, except they weren't running. And the robot dog that was impersonating Treble was nowhere to be seen...

"They're stalling us!" Rock realized. "His support unit is after the artifact!"

"A brilliant deduction," 'not-Bass' complimented. "Though a little too late. My faithful canine has already acquired the target for our master."

"Target is on the move, Sally!" NICOLE shouted.

"After it!" Sally shouted back and the two ladies took off.

"Hey!" Sonic made to follow them, but a retreating salvo from 'not-Bass' and 'possibly-Metal Sonic' impacted in front of them, forcing the blue blur and the blue bomber to halt and throwing up a screen of dust. When it settled, they'd lost sight of both their opponents and their allies.

Silver and Quint had taken off to continue their own mission, but only after directing Cream, Cheese, and Gemerl to where the transport Glue Man had mentioned was located.

The last transport was in the process of leaving when Cream and Gemerl found it, but the gizoid put a stop to that rather quickly and in short order the chao inside the transport were freed. While a happy Cream and Cheese spoke with the freed chao, Gemerl went about accessing the transport's systems. Specifically its intended destination. After all, Glue Man had said this was only the last transport and if Gemerl knew Cream at all...

"He was going to feed you to what?!" the young rabbit cried out in alarm from something the freed chao had told her. "How many are still captured?!"

Gemerl began downloading the transport's destination and plotting the most direct route. Cream would go to save the chao regardless of the danger, so he would remain with her to... *lessen* that danger. By whatever means necessary.

"Well, that was fun," Rouge stretched as Team Dark walked through the outpost in search of a control center, the strewn wrecks of the defending force littering the outside of the installation. "Now we just need to–WHAT THE?!"

"H-h-hi Rouge!" Ray waved from his spot next to the main terminal as Joe accessed the mainframe and brought up information on the screen.

"Don't you 'hi' me you..." a flustered Rouge sputtered indignantly. "I... HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE BEFORE US?!"

"You were so intent on smashing the army outside that it was easy to go around," Joe answered calmly, not even bothering to look in their direction.

"So we smashed our share of the worthless consumer forces and yours?" Omega deduced while Rouge fumed silently. "This arrangement is acceptable."

"Find anything yet?" Shadow decided to just get down to business.

"Yes," Joe nodded and brought up a map showing the current installation and the two others they'd been to before. "This beacon along with two others are transmitting a signal–"

"–to something out in space," Tails explained to the others as the each lounged on convenient wreckage left over from the so-called 'Egg Crab' of Nega's. "And whatever it is is getting closer."

"So where's it going to land?" Knuckles asked, cracking his namesake while Roll and Blues both listened to the fox.

Tails fiddled with his Miles Electric for a bit before pointing in the general direction of the city's shoreline as somewhere in the city an air raid siren began blaring. "Somewhere out–"

"–in the gulf," Joe explained. "Projected damage from the impact will potentially capsize any ships in the immediate area and the waves will cause massive property damage within the first mile of the shoreline. I've already sent an evacuation warning to inhabited areas around the gulf."

"So this is an attack?" Rouge asked.

"Unlikely," Joe answered. "An attack would more likely land in the middle of a city rather than offshore. A water impact suggests that this is a landing of some sort."

"Landing *what* though?" Shadow wondered.

"I-it s-s-says here it's s-something called M-m-meteor B-base," Ray pointed to an image that Joe brought up on the screen that caused Shadow and Rouge to stiffen in recognition.

"Well, shit," Rouge swore.

"We should have finished Nega off when we had the chance," Shadow growled.

"Accessing saved admonishment:" Omega intoned. "I told you so."

Bass groaned as his systems finally rebooted. What the *hell* had hit him?

"So, you regain function at last," a metallic monotone greeted him and Bass opened his eyes to see... about the fifth last face he really wanted to at this moment. Maybe sixth.

"The fuck do you want?" Bass growled as he sat up and started a system diagnostic, feeling a nudge at his elbow as he did. Sparing a glance, he raised his arm and allowed Treble to crawl in under it and lay down at his side.

"The cessation of all pointless life," the other occupant in the... no two ways about it, this was a cell for prisoners... answered. "But for now I would settle for a way out."

"Yeah, well, tough shit I guess," Bass snorted as he examined the cell more thoroughly, "because I'm not seeing one. The hell are we doing here anyway?"

"We were captured so that Eggman Nega could replicate our systems and send his creations out to impersonate us. I was stolen from where my fleshbag of a creator was in the process of rebuilding me... *again* ... and you... were taken more forcibly considering the damage you and your mutt sustained."

Bass considered joining Treble in growling at his fellow prisoner, but decided against it. "That would explain the damned headache, but why are you active now?"

"Because Eggman Nega delights in pointlessly tormenting his adversaries, even if it means undertaking idiotic courses of action."

"Like leaving all of my weapons functioning," Bass grinned as he finished the system diagnostic. "What do you say? Wanna work together to escape and rip this Nega bastard a new asshole? We can go back to hating each other afterwards... Metal Sonic."

The robotic hedgehog stared right back at Bass and his crimson optics flashed in agreement.

Eggman Nega laughed to himself as his glorious Meteor Base fell towards its destination and examined the yellow Chaos Emerald in his hand and the even more impressive Master Emerald in the chamber below. His foolish ancestor was locked in battle with his even more foolish rival on the other side of the planet, his latest army was keeping any resistance nicely occupied until it would be too late, his loyal servants were bringing the final keys to his ultimate triumph

to his doorstep, and his prisoners were safely locked up in the depths of his base.

Who cared that his base would suffer damage from the landing? He certainly didn't. It just needed to hold together long enough for his plan to come to fruition and then...

"And then the world in all times will be mine! OHOHOHOHOHOHOHO!" (40)

Sally and NICOLE were doing their best to keep the Bass impostor and his partner, who might or might not be a version of Metal Sonic, in sight as they all raced for the last portal piece already in possession of the Bass impostor's canine support unit. They needed that portal piece to go after the last Chaos Emerald and if Nega got ahold of it, there was no telling what he's be able to pull.

"GET BACK HERE YOU MUTT!" the roar of Knuckles broke the silence as he and Blues appeared ahead chasing what appeared to be Treble in jet mode carrying the final portal piece. "I'LL TEACH YOU TO TRY AND BLAST ME!"

"Stop that transport!" Cream yelled as she, Cheese, and Gemerl raced after a large hovercraft. The hovercraft sped out over the water of the gulf while the three chased it over a long, if small, peninsula extending into the waters.

"Cream, watch where you're go–" Gemerl started to warn as he spotted the obstacles entering their path.

"Huh–oof!"

Six figures; comprised of three mobians, two robots, and one chao; went tumbling over each other as they collided while the transport sped over the water on its merry way.

"No!" Cream wailed and turned to those she'd run into. "Please! You have to help me stop that transport!"

"Why would I do that?" Rouge grumbled as she and her teammates untangled themselves from the heap. "It's not part of our..."

Rouge made the mistake of looking directly at the wide, pleading, watery eyes of the young rabbit and her vindictive indignant dismissal crumbled like dry dirt.

"Okay, okay!" Rouge backpedaled while nearby Shadow attempted to get Cheese to release his panickes death-grip on the dark hedgehog's spines. "We'll help! What's the big deal anyway?"

"A bad man named Nega has chao in there!" Cream sniffed back a sob. "And he's gonna feed them to a monster!"

"Will we be able to blow something up?" Omega asked, his priorities ever straight.

Gemerl made to reply when a loud burst of water drew everyone's attention to the end of the peninsula where a massive blue and steel machine had burst up from the gulf. The machine had a flat top shaped like a bucket with angled metal prongs pointing downwards along the sides, an angry face like a cartoon octopus with the 'o' shaped mouth, and eight tentacles made from hexagonal panels linked together with energy cannons at the ends of each.

"Ohohohohoho!" Eggman Nega's screechy voice laughed from the machine. "Looks like someone wants to play with my Egg Octo!"

"You can start with that," Gemerl told Omega.

"Preparing to transform target into a calamari scrapheap," Omega intoned as he cocked his arms like shotguns.

"Hey Tails!" Sonic grinned as he spotted his best bud and Rock's sister converging on their path. "I was hoping we'd get to team up sometime during this!"

"Yeah!" Tails grinned back as Rock and Roll traded cursory greetings. "Wanna see which of us can take out whatever Nega sends the fastest?"

"You're on, buddy! Let–"

WHOOM

The impact caused all but Tails, who was technically flying low to the ground, to stumble before looking to see a rather large Robot Master barring their way. He had armor in steel gray and wood tan, with large round discs on his feet and a truly massive claw-hammer attached to the top of his helmet.

"Duh-hey!" the Robot Master pointed at them. "Are you da guys who Hammer Man has ta squash?" (41)

The four heroes blinked as one.

"Seriously?" Sonic recovered first. "Someone got shorted in the brains department."

"Hey-uh!" Hammer Man shouted. "It's not nice ta make resembling remarks like dat!"

"L–*snrk*," Tails fought back a laugh, "Looks like it, Sonic!"

"Ya just made me angry!" Hammer Man snarled and with a flash of energy a large hammer with a head that had a wide flat front and a small pointed back appeared in his hand. "Now I'm gonna crush ya, cause it's hammer time!"

"Where is that nincompoop?!" a gray robot whose entire torso was shaped like a giant nail, complete with a flat metal top over his eyes and a point extending below the ring his legs were attached to, grumbled. He clenched his one fist while the nail gun that was his other arm loaded and unloaded its pointed ammunition repeatedly. "We have intruders coming and he's off on his own again! Can't he ever follow orders?!"

"I think we've come at a bad time, Quint," a voice interrupted the Robot Master's fuming.

"Not for us," another replied.

"Well, of course not for us, I meant for him obviously," the first clarified while the nail-themed robot's temper began to mount.

"SILENCE!" the Robot Master roared as his torso spun independent of his legs. As it did, his nail gun arm spouted four large nails that hung in the air around him for a moment before beginning to circle protectively, their sharpened points facing outwards. "I am Nail Man! I give the orders around here and I order you to surrender immediately!" (42)

The silver hedgehog mobian and the green-armored robot with the blue shades that had intruded simply stared back at him.

"Silver?" the green robot, Quint asked calmly.

"Yep, one nail removal coming up," the hedgehog smirked and extended his hand, which began glowing with a teal aura. The same aura sprung up around the nails circling Nail Man in an attempt to hold them still, and promptly vanished without the nails so much as slowing down. The silver hedgehog's eyes widened in surprise.

"Fools," Nail Man chuckled. "As if any power of yours could trump my shield! But don't worry! This will hold you!"

Nail Man pointed at his two foes who were suddenly on guard and directed his nails to fly at them point first. He laughed at how easy it all seemed, before a new figure landed in the way and blocked with a much more traditional shield.

"Who–" was all Nail Man got out before something slammed into his back, causing him to stumble. When he looked back up, he saw a flying squirrel mobian and the figure who had blocked his attack. "A Joe?! A lowly insignificant stupid JOE?!"

"Yes," the Joe responded before rolling a live grenade at the nail robot.

Nail Man's eyes widened upon seeing the explosive and he reformed his shield quickly, though he took a few shots from the Joe and the Quint robot first. The grenade detonated and the blast was successfully deflected by Nail Man's shield.

Quint turned blue and peach and attempted to try the Glue Shot, only for the sharp nails to easily shred the substance before it could contact Nail Man himself.

"Inferior tactics will not help you!" Nail Man declared as he fired more nails into the air to then rain down over his foes.

Blues grunted from the impact as the robotic hedgehog slammed into his shield. They'd spotted the black and purple canine in jet form carrying some strange device on their way to investigate the potential splash-down zone of whatever was coming this way when said robot had taken exception to their following it and decided to take a potshot at them. That had set Knuckles off and in response, the robo-dog had responded to his rage by seeking out its masters, the robots that looked like Bass and Metal Sonic, but didn't quite act like them.

Those two had been pursued by Sally and NICOLE, who were after the device the canine unit carried, and now it was a racing battle to

try and catch the robo-dog while its masters tried to protect it and its cargo from them.

"Imbeciles!" the Bass-like robot declared as it unleashed suppressing fire on Knuckles and NICOLE. "It is futile to oppose our master! For he is great and mighty, and you are small and–"

Blues cut the black and gold robot off with a shot from his buster after Sally had engaged the Metal Sonic lookalike.

"Geez!" Sonic yelped as he jumped over a wide-arcing shockwave that Hammer Man had generated by slamming the hammer-shaped attachment on his head into the ground. "For a dumb guy, he sure knows how to use his head!"

"He sure does!" Tails agreed from the air.

"Stop callin' me dumb!" Hammer Man roared as he threw several of his large hammers at the two grinning mobians.

"Stop leaving your back open, then!" Roll admonished as she and Rock tagged Hammer Man and both turned wood-tan and steel-gray from copying his weapon.

"You stop makin' fun a' me right now!" Hammer Man angrily turned around and threw more hammers at the two robots, who responded with hammers of their own, the projectiles clanging together loudly as they canceled each others' momentum.

"Okay," Rock shrugged. "But you're still leaving your back open."

Whatever Hammer Man's retort would have been, it was silenced by the two Spin Dashes to his back.

"Oh g-g-geez!" Ray frantically evaded as Nail Man's torso, separated from his legs and levitating in the air, tried to impale him from above.

A short ways away, the robot's legs were running after the other three with the barrier of sharp nails surrounding it.

"It is useless to resist!" Nail Man taunted as his torso rose up and his legs rushed under it before recombining. "I am the supreme tactician of Nega's forces!"

Nail Man punctuated the claim by firing more nails into the air to rain down on his opponents before those making up his shield stopped their orbit to fire at each of them as well.

"Now!" Quint yelled as the shield's protection was dropped and the cry was rewarded with action from all four. Silver grabbed some chunks out of the ground with his psychokinesis and flung them at the robot, Quint and Joe opened up with their arm cannons, and Ray slammed into the robot with a flying double-kick.

"Annoying thick-headed insects!" Nail Man yelled as he reformed his shield and glared. "You got lucky, but you have not the brains to trap me a second time!"

"How about the brawn?" Quint snarled as he turned purple and orange before levelling his buster at Nail Man and shooting a spray of pure trinitroglycerin at the robot.

BABABOOM!

Nail Man's eyes widened as the liquid exploded, the blasts tearing straight through his barrier of nails and into his body. And Quint didn't stop with one use of the weapon once he saw how effective it was, he kept firing until he was out and Nail Man fell over in a smoldering heap.

Breathing to circulate cooling air over his circuits, Quint stepped up to the prone form of Nail Man before kneeling down and copying his weapon. The robot from the future turned gray and tan as the Nail Shield became his.

"I don't believe this!" Nega's voice screeched from the Egg Octo's form as the machine's systems began suffering catastrophic failure after the repeated attacks by its foes. "You may have beaten this machine, but it's the last thing you will ever do! Initiate Self Destruct!"

"Cream!" Gemerl darted towards the rabbit girl in alarm, grabbing her, her chao, and wrapping them all in a forcefield as he took off as fast as possible. Behind them, a cry of "CHAOS CONTROL" sounded before the aquatic war machine detonated with enough force to carve a crater out of the peninsula.

"Mr. Gemerl..."

"Yes, are you alright Cream?"

"We still have to save those chao..."

"Of course, Cream."

"We've got you now, whoever you are!" Sally declared as she slashed at the Bass-clone, sending him to the ground while Knuckles punched out the latest robot hedgehog in her life and Blues and NICOLE got ahead of the Treble-imposter and cut him off.

"Well struck indeed," the Bass-imposter complimented and got to his feet. His canine companion transformed back into dog mode and backed up to join him as they both flanked the hedgehog robot. "It is too bad for you that it was all in vain."

"What do you mean?" Knuckles snarled, brandishing his fist threateningly. "Tell us now!"

"Isn't it obvious?" the robot smiled tolerantly before pointing upwards.

Despite herself, Sally looked up and gasped when she saw the burning object plummeting through the air for the center of the gulf.

"My master has arrived, and your world is forfeit before his might."

Sally half expected the robot to burst out laughing, but he just kept smiling in that way of his as the blazing object grew ever closer to impact, before suddenly vanishing in a teleportation beam along with his two companions and the last portal piece.

"No!" Sally cried out just before the object impacted and a massive wall of water was thrown up, heading straight for them.

Bass shook off his internal alarms following the impact and looked around his cell before grinning.

"Heh... Looks like Nega forgot to build this thing to code. Freedom here we–"

Treble whined as the sound of rushing water cut his master off.

"Did you say 'freedom' or 'Davy Jones' Locker'?" Metal Sonic spat out at the same time the walls of their cell burst open from the water pressure.

"Ohhhh... my head..." Nega groaned as he righted himself. "That was a bigger impact than I expected..."

"Are you alright, master?"

"Of course I'm alright!" Nega snapped. "I'm the rightful ruler of the world! There's no way I'd ever be anything else! Did you get it?!"

"Of course, master," his creation brought out a device that shimmered in and out of existence independent of any light source. Upon the device was a stylized 'Y'.

"And the rest of it?" Nega frowned.

"My humblest apologies, master. The nuisance known as 'Sally Acorn' still possesses them."

"Bah! Nevermind then. She'll be bringing them to me soon enough."

"Pardon my failure, master, but your collected foes have proven stronger than anticipated."

"Well, then I guess it's time to upgrade you," a wicked grin split Nega's face.

"Damn scrapping giant piranha bots!" Bass swore violently as another of the damn things darted out from yet another broken alcove and tried to bite him in half. "Fucking seahorse pieces of waste oil!" he growled, blasting one of the purple idiocies that had come from the other direction while Treble pounced on another. As he was doing so, a piece of shrapnel caught him in the back.

"Creator-fucking *GLITCH* !" Bass roared. "What the hell do you think you're doing, you tin-plated rodent?!"

"Cataloguing profanities for later use," Metal Sonic intoned from where he'd supposedly been disarming the aquatic mines barring their way. "Do continue. They are quite fascinating."

"GO BUG YOURSELF UP YOUR PRIMARY RAM CHIP!" (43)

"Showoff," Quint snorted as he watched the massive wave of water part around the rooftop he and Silver had been standing on due to the hedgehog's psychokinesis.

"Like you wouldn't have done the same in my place," Silver smirked.

Whatever Quint's reply would have been was interrupted by a shout of greeting from above and the two figures looked up to see the

Mega Woman riding her feline support unit's jet board mode with Tails in tow.

"If I never see another of pops' stupid thrice-damned weaponized water filters, it will be way too damned soon," Bass grumbled as he and Metal Sonic exited an underwater breach in Nega's busted-up base of operations, stepping over what looked like a giant mechanical jellyfish made of metal struts.

Metal Sonic made an odd noise that sounded like he was trying to imitate laughter. "What did you say, again? 'I refuse to lose to a glorified fucking brita with delusions of grandeur'?"

"Shut up!" Bass snapped right before Treble, utilizing an aquatic version of his jet mode, growled at something.

Bass wasn't even through the first syllable of 'what is it, boy?' when all three of them were thrown off-balance by a sudden shift in the water currents.

Tumbling and swearing loudly, Bass finally managed to find purchase on the sea floor. Nearby Treble dug his steel claws into a rocky outcropping and Metal Sonic countered the sudden current with his thrusters.

"Pity you do not know how to go with the flow," a new voice declared. The three escapees looked to see a mostly light blue robot, with a few ocean blue and steel gray parts, that had a large cylinder for a torso with a big outboard motor fan in a circular opening in the center. Said cylinder extended to include the robot's head and still further before bending forwards at ninety degrees and ending with an open pipe. Two more cylinders almost as large, and with more aquatic turbines, made up the robot's shoulders. One of the attached arms ended in a large cannon of some kind and the robot's legs and feet were decorated with sharp-looking fins.

"When the hell did Pump Man and Air Man get together and how the flying fuck did they have a kid?" Bass sneered as he took in the enemy Robot Master.

"I am Whirlpool Man," the Robot Master declared as his eyes, the only facial features he had save for a circular parody of a mouth, spun around the back of his head and returned to the front from the other side. "Appointed by the great Eggman Nega as general of his navy!" (44)

"Admiral," Metal Sonic corrected.

"Prisoners are not to speak!" Whirlpool Man shouted, his turbines whirring at a fast pace as his shoulders rotated several times before stopping perpendicular to his body. "Much less nitpick how Lord Nega chooses to organize his forces!"

"I am so glad no one actually needs saving in this mess," Sonic said as he and Rock flew on Rush's Jet mode over the waterlogged coastal area. All around them, the sound of an alert siren blared from the distance.

"I suppose it's good luck that everyone evacuated before that thing hit," Rock nodded in agreement.

"M-m-maybe n-not," another voice cut into their search as a familiar face flew up.

"Hey Ray!" Sonic greeted. "What's up?"

"We are looking for possible stragglers from the evacuation we called in," Joe informed them as the helicopter MET he was holding carried him to the group.

"That was you?" Rock blinked in surprise. "You saved a lot of lives."

"Just doing our duty."

Bass was furious. As if everything else wasn't enough, the mines that Whirlpool Man kept deploying to swirl around as he manipulated the water currents had seriously injured Treble. He fully intended to take the bug-bastard's weapon and see how he liked getting blown up!

"Gotcha!" he snarled, finally tagging the aquatic robot and taking the... Water Cannon? Not the blasted mines?

"Stop stalling," Metal Sonic admonished the now ocean blue with sky blue trim Bass as he destroyed several mines before they could detonate properly.

"Shut up!" Bass growled before turning to Whirlpool Man and leveling his new weapon at the Robot Master. "Let's see how you like it!"

Whirlpool Man simply floated in the current, unimpressed as a stream of tiny harmless bubbles issued from Bass's arm cannon amidst a stream of water no stronger than a stiff breeze amidst the ocean. (45)

"THE FUCK IS UP WITH THIS THING?!"

"Fool!" Whirlpool Man declared, his aquatic turbines whirring pointedly. "You do not have the necessary systems to manipulate the ocean currents as I do!"

"Fine, then you son of a glitch!" Bass roared as he turned back to his usual black and gold and trained both buster arms on the aquatic robot and opening up with twin streams of rapid-fire. "We'll do this the old fashioned way!"

"So that wasn't really Bass?" Shadow asked as Team Dark stood on the shore, looking out at the remains of Eggman Nega's Meteor Base in the middle of the gulf.

"Not according to Rock," NICOLE confirmed from where she and Sally stood nearby. "Too polite, and too ready to flee from battle among other inconsistencies."

"I thought he wasn't quite himself," Rouge snorted.

"News: Good," Omega seemed as pleased as his lack of emotive capacity ever managed. "If the enemy Bass is an impostor, there is no need to hold back."

"Master, we have incoming," the robot disguised as Bass declared as he brought up the monitoring systems. At least what was left of them.

"Take care of it," Nega commanded as he continued working on the canine robot, now a black and red instead of black and purple with its disguise offline.

"Master? But you have not finished the upg–"

"THEN DON'T GET BLOWN UP!" Nega snapped furiously. "Call back whoever is left of the generals, deploy the Egg Devil and Egg Phantom, and take Metal Sonic 3.0 with you!"

Silenced by the order, the robot looked over at his partner, now openly showing the black with yellow stripes design he really possessed rather than his blue-colored disguise. Metal Sonic 3.0's eyes flashed in acknowledgement of the order. (46)

"As you wish, master," the robot bowed before moving to signal Jet Man and Whirlpool Man. Jet Man responded immediately that he was on his way, but Whirlpool Man failed to respond at all…

"There it is..." Knuckles declared grimly as he glided along towards the wrecked Meteor Base.

"Yeah, whatever Nega is planning has to be big for him to crash his base like this," Blues agreed as he flew along using Beat's Jet Adaptor.

"The transport carrying the chao went in through there," Gemerl reported, pointing to one of the larger openings in the base's exterior.

"Then let's go!" Cream declared and angled herself into a dive to gain speed.

"Hey! Wait for us!" Knuckles yelled after the girl before doing the same.

"Well, this shouldn't be too hard," Sonic mused as the group landed on what could be called the beach of Nega's Meteor Base. Assuming you could tilt your head and squint hard enough.

Rock facepalmed as Joe and Ray exchanged looks.

"You h-h-had to say it, d-didn't you?" the flying squirrel crossed his arms and glared at his friend.

"Oops?" Sonic had the good grace to look abashed.

"Here we are," Tails declared as he and the rest landed on what was left of a plateau on Nega's Meteor Base.

"Excellent," Silver slammed a fist into his palm and cracked his knuckles. "We'll come in from above and work our way down! Nega won't know what hit him!"

"Let's just get inside this thing before something happens," Roll said, as she scanned for possible defenses. Some were sure to have survived that impact.

"Agreed, let–" Quint nodded before cutting off as an alert flared to life on his sit-rep shades indicating an enemy target lock. "MOVE!"

Everyone dove to the side just in time as a missile impacted the middle of their group and sent up a large cloud of dust.

"Target Destroyed: Moving on to next," a voice spoke from above.

"Better check again!" Tails yelled as he shot out of the dust at a hot-rod red robot with wings like a fighter jet complete with jet propulsion tail, an elongated black shaded visor over his head reminiscent of a cockpit, blue-tipped missile launchers for arms, and landing gear wheels on the ends of his legs instead of feet.

"Correction, base: Targets remain. Engaging further. Jet Man over and out." (47)

"Okay, here we are," Sally noted as she, NICOLE, and Team Dark touched down on the devastated Meteor Base near a broken entrance hatch.

"And here you shall be buried," the voice of the false Bass greeted them as the impostor stepped out from inside the broken hatch followed by what looked like Metal Sonic painted black with yellow stripes. "Isn't that right Metal Sonic 3.0?"

"Is your master incapable of counting?" NICOLE snorted while getting into a ready stance. "Full version upgrades generally begin at 2.0."

"He is simply that much of a genius!" the impostor attempted to declare regally, but there was a noticeable twitch in his eye. "It's why I am happy to serve him instead of–"

"Oh, come off it," Rouge interrupted. "We know you're not really Bass you fake!"

"Well, I suppose that means I can dispose of this disguise at last," the robot smirked at the accusation. There was a shimmer as his armor rearranged itself. The colors were still mostly black with gold trim, but the armor's design was notably different. The shoulders and leg armor pieces were more angular with pointed edges, but the biggest difference was the helmet. Gone were Bass's trademarked fins, replaced by a vertical gold crest over the middle of the helmet with a blue triangular forehead gem at the front. Over his ears were what appeared to be gold wing-like shaped and the robot's face was unmarked by Bass's typical 'war paint'. "Pleased to introduce myself at last, I am Ba–"

His introduction was cut off by gunfire from Omega, forcing him to dodge.

"Names are irrelevant to scrap metal," Omega intoned, preparing another shot.

"If you insist... scrap metal," the robot's face split in a sadistic grin before he and Metal Sonic 3.0 charged.

"What the hell is up with the creepy lighting in this room?" Knuckles wondered as he tried to focus on the location of the Master Emerald. They were getting close, he could feel it.

"Bad taste in decorating?" Blues guessed.

"I-i-i-it f-feels like w-w-we're being w-watched," Cream shivered and hugged Cheese close for comfort. "L-l-like a g-g-..."

"Like a what, Cream?" Gemerl questioned as he turned to see the young girl looking back, her fur seeming to pale as she pointed at a large sheet-white form hovering behind the group with its translucent sheet-like form twisted so the folds formed a scowling face.

"GHOST!"

"This is clearly a trap," Joe noted as the four examined the shuttered door.

"It's also our only way through," Rock replied.

"Come on!" Sonic grinned, slinging an arm around Ray's shoulders. "We'll trash whatever's behind here, no prob! It'll be just like old times, buddy!"

"Y-yeah!" Ray tried to mimic Sonic's enthusiasm as the four approached the door and stepped through as it opened.

None were surprised when it slammed shut behind them.

"Laser cannons on each wall and ceiling," Joe noted as he examined the room, which was empty save for themselves and the laser cannons.

"Dual tracked, too," Rock nodded. "so they can be positioned to fire from any point on their assigned surface."

"And here's our latest contestant!" Sonic grinned as a purple blob shimmered into existence mid-air, before opening a familiar eye.

"A d-d-d-d-devil series?!" Ray gulped.

"Looks like," Sonic smirked. "Nega even shaped it like an egg too!"

And then talking became a luxury as the Egg Devil and the wall-mounted laser cannons began firing.

"So what are jets generally vulnerable to?" Quint had asked sardonically after the Mega Woman had nixed his choices of the Glue Shot, the Tank Arsenal, and even the Hammer Throw that she'd rather generously gifted him with. Trying to evade the repeated high speed bombardment and targeted missile strikes was getting

tiresome for all of them after all, and so a counteroffensive was necessary.

"Head-on collisions," both Tails and the Mega Woman had replied in unison.

That had left the rather obvious choice of Comet Dash, and after a shared nod with Silver, Quint prepared the weapon to meet Jet Man's next pass. As he heard the plane-themed robot master approach, he prepared himself and shot forwards at the last moment in a burst of speed that coated his body in energy and created a shockwave.

Sadly, Jet Man had barrel rolled around the main strike and was only clipped by the shockwave. Fortunately, Silver's follow-up blow using his own psychokinetic energy to boost into the air had scored a direct hit. Jet Man spiraled out of control before deciding to try and kamikaze the group.

The Mega Woman and Tails had been ready for that eventuality and left the aerial robot broken at their feet, ready to have his weapon copied.

And as Quint did so, turning hot-rod red and steel gray, he wondered why the Mega Woman had insisted it be him to do so.

"Ohohohoho!" Nega's voice screeched from the phantom. "There's no escaping the Egg Phantom! It has no weaknesses!"

"Except maybe the fact that its holographic shell fades in strong light sources," Blues noted, his coloration turning violet and lavender. (48) "Say cheese."

A bright flash of light stripped the ghostly form away to reveal the hovering machine underneath. A second later and a triple impact from Knuckles, Cream, and Gemerl sent it crashing into the wall where it shattered.

Rouge reflected that this was not going the way she and the others had anticipated. Omega had tried to stop the charge of Metal Sonic 3.0 and whoever had been impersonating Bass, only to get his arms blown off for his trouble. One had detonated at the forearm while the other had been sheared off at the shoulder. Omega had sputtered in confusion while their opponents took advantage of it to sow even more.

"CHAOS BL–oof!" Shadow took a roundhouse kick to the gut from the impostor that sent him careening into a cliff face while the princess and her holo-buddy dueled Metal Sonic 3.0.

Rouge herself was nursing a bruised face from where she'd taken a kick herself trying to blindside the robot with a Black Wave.

"It's over, you wastrels!" not-Bass crowed. "There is nothing you can do to stop our master!"

"Negative," Omega intoned and Rouge looked to see the walking armory had opened his chest to reveal yet more weapons. All trained on the former Bass impostor. "We can blow you to smoldering ashes. Fi–"

The opponent had whipped dual arm cannons at Omega too fast to react and fired. Rouge watched as her destructive friend went up in a massive fireball as his own munitions detonated internally. (49)

"Omega!" Rouge called out as time seemed to slow down. And then she spotted an object tumbling and squawking from the conflagration to land a few feet away. Looking closer, she recognized a smoldering flicky bird.

Omega's biological core this Loop.

And then she saw the not-Bass aim his arm cannons at her downed friend.

Without thinking, Rouge darted forwards to scoop up the injured bird and hold him close. She heard the buster shots impact followed by the sound of automatic gunfire. Either Shadow had picked up Omega's severed arm or he'd pulled part of his gun collection out of his pocket. Either way, she focused on keeping away from the not-Ba–

A stray shot clipped her leg and she stumbled, losing hold of flicky-Omega. A mild explosion and Shadow began swearing up a storm. Apparently he'd lost whatever firearm he'd picked up. Rouge got to her feet and say not-Bass raising his foot to stomp on flicky-Omega.

Dashing forwards as fast as she could, Rouge scooped the bird up again just barely ahead of the metal boot and rolled to her feet, befo–

Everything Rouge knew was drowned out by the sharp impact to her back, a sickening crack, and the unbearable pain as her spine was snapped in two. (50)

"Okay guys, say cheese!" Sonic grinned as he held the camera steady on his buddy and his robotic partner. The room around them was nicely trashed and the Egg Devil... Well, between a pretty sweet shot by that Joe character and Ray's super flying drop kick, the ocular control unit was now a giant prop in one of the coolest photo ops of the Loop.

"Ch-ch-cheese!" Ray grinned amidst his heroic pose atop the broken Devil Core as Sonic snapped the picture. Plus a few more for good measure.

Sonic would be one of the first to admit that his buddy was awesome, but Ray could still use all the confidence builders he could get.

"Was that really necessary?" Joe asked as he finally stepped away from the downed machine.

"Probably not," Rock shrugged, "but it's not every day you see a flying squirrel and a Joe unit take down a Devil Series. Speaking of... how did you end up going renegade anyway? No offense, but the Joe models aren't supposed to be capable of thought processes nearly as complex as what you've shown."

"No offense was taken," Joe noted, "though I fail to see how such information is relevant to our circumstances, or indeed any of your business."

"Well..." Rock tried to think of the best way to say that he thought Joe might be a looper, but an explosion from further inside the base reminded him that there were more pressing matters.

The moment he'd heard Rouge's scream of pain, Shadow had seen red. He'd started the process to remove his limiter rings before he even knew what he was doing in order to spread the faker's tin-plated ass all over the gulf.

Unfortunately, Metal Sonic 3.0 had blindsided him from behind before he'd even loosened the first.

Shadow hadn't let that stop him though. He'd turned the undesired forwards momentum into a Spin Dash instead and...

That hadn't fared any better. The Bass impostor had met the deadly charge with an overhead strike so hard that Shadow had bounced after being spiked into the ground. And then he'd been launched towards the water with a spinning kick.

Gritting his teeth in fury as he pulled himself from the water, Shadow pulled out the purple Chaos Emerald and prepared to return to battle.

"CHAOS... CONT–"

He almost lost focus of the warping technique when he felt the hand clamp onto his shoulder.

Quint, Silver, Tails, and Roll were rushing through the complex towards the central command center when a massive form fell in front of them.

THOOM

"Hammer Man?" Roll blinked, getting into a ready stance.

"Targets acquired," the large robot answered in a clipped monotone.

"A copy at least," Tails noted, taking in the robot's blank expression.

"Engaging," A second identical monotone stated from the side just before a stream of water blindsided the group. (51)

Rouge was having trouble concentrating past a number of things.

There was the searing pain in her back that stabbed at her brain with even the smallest movements. That was a hard thing to do.

"N...L.! ...t.c. ..u..!"

There was that ringing in her ears that made it hard to think. It sounded like fighting. Maybe it was. There was also a sense that she was very much in danger.

"...s n. ..e, mi... ..ur ..ie.. .. . de.. ..t ..awl... .nd .oo. ...'ll jo.. ..r."

There was the very disturbing sensation of being unable to feel her legs. Walkers, why couldn't she feel her legs?!

"N.. ..u ..o.! I ne.. ... ali.. ..ng ...ug. .. .. oth.. Y... ...ts!"

"O. ...r... ma..."

There was something about Eggman... Or Nega... Eggman Nega? Nega Eggman? She couldn't remember at the moment. What she could remember was that sound. The sound of breaking bone echoing in her ears.

Snap

"A...hh!"

Just like that... But she forced herself onwards, not really sure where. She was only certain of one thing. The one thought the drowned out all the others. The tiny thing she could barely feel clutched to her chest with one arm past all the pain.

She had to protect Omega. She didn't know how, but she had to.

"–ROL!"

Looking up at the sound some part of her found familiar, Rouge saw a pair of black blurs.

And she smiled.

Blues held his shield as the walking tank and his nitroglycerin-spraying partner continued their assault.

"Mr. Blues!" Cream yelled as the red raider almost seemed to be engulfed in explosions.

"Get her out of here!" Knuckles yelled, charging at the enemy robots.

"No, I won't leave you!" the young rabbit wailed even as Gemerl picked her up bodily and prepared to flee.

"You're here to free the chao, right?" Blues shouted back, the question punctuated with an emphatic from a worried Cheese. "Then go find them while we keep these things busy!"

"They're right, Cream," Gemerl reminded the girl. "They have their mission and we have ours."

"Bass?! Is that really you?"

"Who the fuck else would I be?"

"Well..."

Shadow had insisted Bass had to see it for himself. And so he was.

It wasn't an encouraging sight.

There were pieces of metal scrap all over that looked like they came from Omega. Rouge was on the ground trying to crawl away with one arm while the other clutched something Bass couldn't see. Neither the fact that her legs were dragging limply behind her attempts to crawl away, nor the fact that her eyes weren't properly focusing on anything, was a good sign.

He saw the holographic lynx NICOLE fighting some weird black and yellow Metal Sonic... Metal Sonic 3.0. It had to be. Unfortunately, the computer-generated combatant had her attention split worrying about the last figure in the tableau.

Princess Sally Acorn was being held up by a humanoid robot that looked way too much like Bass himself for his comfort levels. She was being held roughly by her hair in one of the robot's hands while the other pointed an arm cannon at her midsection. One of her arms hung limply at an odd angle, clearly broken.

"Treble..." Bass ordered in a growl, his faithful companion appearing in a flash of purple light as Metal Sonic 3.0 and NICOLE locked in a struggle, the latter trying to keep the former away from Rouge. "Get Rouge out of here. Now."

Treble barked once before bounding over to Rouge in a single movement and grabbing onto her before they both vanished in a flash of light.

"Protecting the weaklings?" the robot who would be Bass's twisted mirror if not for the design of his armor smirked. "Careful, your failings are showing."

"Sh-Shado–AAHHH!" Sally called out before tossing something the dark hedgehog's way. She got a sharp blow to her broken arm for her trouble, but Shadow caught the item easily. Bass idly noted it as NICOLE's pocket computer. Her real body.

"Ah-ah, princess," Bass's double tsked. "No more of that. You're only alive because my master wished it so, but he may change his mind if you become too much of a nuisance."

"Who the fuck are you, anyway?" Bass sneered.

"I am Baroque," Bass's double performed as shallow a mock bow as possible, his infuriating smirk never wavering. (52)

"Sal–oof!" NICOLE was kicked back by a sudden maneuver from the black metal hedgehog she was fighting.

"And this is my partner, Metal Sonic 3.0," Baroque continued as Metal Sonic 3.0 moved to stand in front of him. "If you decide to test us, you will find we are far superior combatan–"

"Shut your pie hole," the monotone insult heralded a blue streak that slammed into Metal Sonic 3.0 and carried him into a wall with a crash. Upon impact, the blue streak was revealed to be the original Metal Sonic. "Talk is cheap."

Rock and Sonic had been separated from Joe and Ray when they were ambushed by the duo of Comet Woman and Jet Man, or at

least copies of them. Rock and Sonic had elected to stay and fight the two while Ray and Joe kept going.

The explosions elsewhere in the complex kept echoing around them.

Baroque's superior smirk had slipped when Metal Sonic arrived. He was apparently confident that he and Metal Sonic 3.0 were more than a match for Shadow and Bass, but with the original Metal Sonic keeping his partner busy, and with orders to keep his captive alive, he suddenly seemed much less certain.

"Baroque, eh?" Bass sneered back at his double. "How appropriate, since you're about to get 'baroquen'..."

"You are a feeble-minded and outdated model," Baroque backed up towards the entryway behind him. "Were it not for my master's orders, I would prove how inferior you are after his improvements to myself."

"You keep telling yourself that," Bass began advancing slowly. He could hear Shadow cracking his knuckles as the hedgehog followed.

"No need," Baroque grinned before turning and dashing into the complex, Sally giving a cry of pain as she was roughly dragged after him.

Bass and Shadow darted forwards, only to be brought up short as a burst of multicolored light erupted in their faces.

" *Creator fucker!* "

Roll and Tails darted through the facility, trusting that Quint and Silver knew what they were doing in handling the copies of Hammer Man and Whirlpool Man. As they ran, they heard a commotion up ahead.

Exchanging glances, they sped up. In a short time, they came across the broken remains of what Roll recognized as Yo-Yo Man and the sight of Cream and Gemerl trying to evade an assault by Nail Man.

"Head's up!" Roll shouted as she opened fire.

"Additional hostiles detected," the copy of Nail Man declared, turning to throw its active Nail Shield at them. Roll and Tails evaded the sharp projectiles easily, and removing his protection proved to be the Nail Man copy's undoing as Gemerl tore through the construction model from behind.

"You won't get away with this..." Sally gasped out as she was dragged along at high speed, the echoes of battle elsewhere in the facility sounding all around her and her captor.

"Of course I will," Baroque replied evenly as he reached his destination and slowed down long enough for Sally to orient herself, "for my master wills it."

"Indeed I do!" Eggman Nega greeted them. "And now, with you bringing me the rest of the Yoku Parts, there's nothing to stop me! Ohohohoho–"

Sally chose that moment to activate the gravity control mechanism in the wrist weapon on her good arm and fling a surprised Baroque off of her. Ignoring how much her broken arm hurt, Sally switched to the energy blade and dashed at Eggman Nega.

"What the–?!"

"Crash!" Baroque snarled and Sally's charge was halted as a black and red object slammed into her.

There had been little warning when it happened. A robot with wheels on his feet had barreled around a corner directly at them. Ray had

panicked and gone into a knee-jerk martial arts maneuver that swept the robot's wheeled feet out from under it to send it tumbling over to where Joe had smashed it in the face with his shield. And then shot it through the head for good measure.

The whole encounter was over in barely a second.

Quint snorted from stop the hefty Hammer Man as he deactivated the Water Cannon weapon and turned from ocean and sky blue back to his usual green and lime form. Nearby, the nearly mindless replica of a 'Whirlpool Man' (according to the schematics his copy chip had gleaned) lay in a broken heap, his aquatic turbines halted with the Glue Shot and his chassis crushed from the Hammer Throw.

"Nega must be desperate if he's sending mindless minions after us now," Silver noted.

"Or stalling," Quint observed.

The two exchanged a knowing glance before dashing deeper into the complex.

"Having trouble, Knux?" Sonic grinned as he and Rock finally found the source of the explosions.

"You want to try dealing with these explosions?" Knuckles yelled back. "Be my guest!"

"I've got an idea," Rock exchanged a glance with Blues.

"I think I see where you're going with this," the red raider smirked as both began charging their weapons. "On three."

"Go." Metal Sonic had told them. *"I shall handle this one for you."*

And so Bass, Shadow, and NICOLE had went. They'd torn through the rainbow robot and carved a swath through what little defenses remained as they followed Baroque into the depths of Meteor Base's remains.

About halfway through, Treble had teleported back in and joined them in their rush. And now, they had arrived at what Shadow said was the place's command center.

Proving he was right were the figures of Nega and Baroque standing atop a high platform with Sally held captive by the latter and a black and red doberman robot stood at Baroque's feet.

"Hold it right there, Nega!" the voice of Quint bellowed from an entrance at the other side of the chamber.

"Your evil scheming ends today, Nega!" Silver declared dramatically. "Surrender! It's no use!"

"Fools!" Nega cackled in his high pitched voice. "There is nothing you can do to sto–"

Whatever Nega was going to say was cut off as the wall opposite him; between the duo of Quint and Silver and the group of Shadow, Bass, NICOLE, and Treble; exploded mightily.

"Your creator thinks simply calling you 3.0 makes you superior," Metal Sonic intoned while he and his double dueled as they rose into the air. "He is incorrect."

"You guys," Sonic grinned as he, Blues, Knuckles, and Rock stepped through the dust and into the room. "Did we miss anyth–SAL!"

"Ohohohohoho!" Nega laughed as if the wall to his command chamber hadn't just been blown to bits. "Why, you haven't missed a thing! You're just in time to see my ultimate triumph!"

Nega gestured to a device hovering over what had used to be the center of the chamber.

"Behold! The first of the Yoku Parts! The pieces of the ultimate zone portal and the keys to my ultimate triumph!" (53)

"The... Yoku Parts?" Quint asked. "You don't mean...?"

"I do!" Nega cackled. "The portal to the ultimate zone where reality itself is fluid and everything is possible!"

"You guys know what he's talking about?" Knuckles asked.

"There's a legend that will be uncovered decades from now about a portal to a zone that would drive everyone who entered it mad," Silver informed them. "A Zone ruled over by the 'Yoku Master'."

"A Zone from which no enemy of the portal's master ever returned," Nega grinned sadistically. "And what's more, the portal itself can open a gateway to any Zone at all. Even those supposedly sealed off from access."

"You'll never get the rest of the parts..." Sally grunted from where she was restrained by Baroque.

"Oh, but I shall!" Nega grinned and pressed a button behind him. "Right now in fact!"

The Yoku Part in the center of the room began glowing and Sally gave a sudden cry of shock as three more appeared around her before moving to join the first.

"Sal!" Sonic shouted in concern and dashed towards where she was held.

'Those... They just tore themselves out of my subspace pocket!' Sally thought in a daze.

"Ohohohoho!" Nega cackled as the Yoku Parts arranged themselves in a segmented ring and began to glow even brighter.

In a flash of light, a Zone portal appeared in the center of the devices, and began to draw air into it at a rapid pace. Sonic's rush to grab Sally was interrupted as the rush of air pulled him off his feet and towards the portal.

"Sonic!" Sally cried out, activating her wrist blade and sending a wild slash that forced Baroque to release her. She dove after Sonic, and succeeded in tackling him away from the portal. Unfortunately, this caused her to fall into it instead.

"Sal!" Sonic shouted in dismay before Rock grabbed him to prevent the hedgehog from jumping in deliberately.

As if that was a cue, the rush of air increased in intensity.

"Shadow!" NICOLE's eyes widened as the increased rush of air ripped her handheld body out of the hedgehog's grasp. Reacting on instinct, Shadow dove after it and got caught in the rush of air. The moment NICOLE's handheld form went through the portal, her holographic body vanished. A moment later and Shadow too was lost through the portal.

Nearby, Blues was struggling to keep his footing while holding onto Knuckles the Echidna. A potshot from Baroque caused Blues to lose his footing and get sucked towards the portal. He managed to throw Knuckles free hard enough that the echidna latched his namesake into the ceiling, but the recoil of the throw sealed his fate.

"Silver, hang on!" Quint's voice was heard on the other side of the room where Sakugarne was anchored to the floor. Quint was barely holding on with his feet while he tried to pull Silver back with his hands. The hedgehog tried to use his psychokinesis to aid the effort, but the energy seemed to get sucked into the portal along with the air.

And then Quint's feet slipped free and both robot and hedgehog from the future went tumbling for the portal. Thinking fast, Quint twisted around and hurled Silver straight for Sakugarne before using his rotation to bring his charging arm cannon to bear on the Yoku Parts generating the portal. The moment he hit the portal, Quint fired.

The moment he finished vanishing into the portal, the devices flickered from the shot and faded away completely, taking the portal with them.

"Yeeek!" Cream yelled as she nearly ran into a green robot after turning a corner. A moment later and weapons were trained on said robot who ducked behind a shield.

"H-h-hi guys!" Ray waved from behind the robot, defusing the tension.

"Sorry about that," Roll smiled sheepishly as she turned her arm back from a canon.

"Understandable," Joe nodded, lowering his shield. "We were just attempting to break into one of Nega's storerooms."

"Need any help?" Tails volunteered.

Sally looked around at the strange surroundings of the new zone. The whole place was, as Sonic might put it, a trip.

The ground she was sitting on shimmered like some neon hologram despite being distinctly solid and the sky... looked like she imagined the inside of a disco ball might.

And then there were the things that appeared and disappeared with that strange sound like some mutant vacuum cleaner dopplering into

the distance. Blocks, wall, ladders, spikes, and things she didn't really want to think about. All arranged in ways that would give M. C. Esher a headache. (54)

But that was all better than looking at what Shadow was about to do with her broken arm.

"Hold still, princess," Shadow told her, gripping her arm tightly. His voice echoed oddly in the distorted space of the zone, just like every other sound in it.

Damn but he was taking his sweet time.

"Are you going to set it or noAAAHH!"

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" Sally growled out.

"Little bit," Shadow admitted.

"I've got the splint ready to apply," NICOLE stated.

"Good," Blues nodded. "Let's get that on her so we can start looking for a way out of... what did you say this place was again, Quint?"

"The Zone of Illusion."

"You are better than I thought," Metal Sonic observed as both he and his knockoff sparked from wounds in the air as they remained locked in a death grip. "But were you granted independent backup download and restoration?"

Metal Sonic 3.0's eyes flashed in confusion.

"I thought not. Farewell. Perhaps I should say 'it was nice knowing you', but..."

Metal Sonic's frame began to glow from overload.

"I would be lying."

BOOM

"NO!" Nega fumed and pounded a control panel while Baroque watched impassively. "THAT... THAT... I *HATE* THAT ROBOT!"

"You okay SIlver?" Rock asked the time traveler.

"I'm *fine* ," Silver waved him off gruffly. "We have to stop Nega so we can get the others ba–"

The entire room stopped and stared as the portal reappeared right where it had been, before fading back out again.

"The hell?" Knuckles voiced the room's thoughts.

"Took the words right out of my mouth," Bass admitted.

"OHOHOHOHOHOHOHO!" Nega began laughing. "I've done it! A spacially unstable portal whose entrance and exit can be altered to any destination in existence! And it's mine! ALL MINE!"

"Uh-huh..." Sonic tapped his foot impatiently. "Ya know, we might have something to say about that."

"Who cares!" Nega grinned like a maniac. "Baroque! Crash! DESTROY THEM!"

"As you wi–" Baroque began before pausing. "Master, I am sorry to report that Metal Sonic 3.0's signal has gone offline."

"WHAT?!"

"Aw, Nega, did one of your toys get broken?" Sonic smirked. "Maybe you should stop building them so cheap."

"Who cares!" Silver growled as he stepped forwards and began to float in the air with his psychokinesis. "Give up Nega! It's no use resisting!"

"..."

"You may have a replica Bass, but we have you outnumbered," Rock noted as he stooped to pick up Sakugarne where the battle jackhammer had fallen. He smiled as the unit readily accepted him as a temporary user and propped it up like he'd seen Quint do in countless Loops.

"And outclassed," Knuckles cracked his namesake.

"Please," Bass scoffed as he stepped forwards and recalibrated a shoulder joint. "I can take my half-assed knockoff singlehandedly. "You guys just figure out what order you kick the whiny bastard's ass in."

"Hehehehehe..." Nega began laughing. "HOHOHOHOHO! You FOOLS! You thought I would leave myself without appropriate defenses?"

"Kinda," Sonic smirked. "You just seem like the arrogant type."

"THINK AGAIN!" Nega pressed something and the wall behind him broke apart as a giant machine blasted through, an opening at the front that Nega and the platform he stood upon was swallowed by while Baroque and Crash pumped down. "BEHOLD MY ULTIMATE WAR MACHINE! THE EGG–"

"YOU FUCKING LIAR!" Bass roared, pointing accusingly at the giant skull face on the front of the machine. "THAT'S ONE OF MY DAD'S WAR MACHINES YOU STUPID-ASS THIEF!"

"Yeah, that's a Wily Machine alright," Rock noted with complete confidence.

"SILENCE!" Nega screamed. "I also have my elite enforcer, Baroque! Improved off of that idiot Wily's own creation! And now that his partner Crash has been upgraded with my own brilliant designs, he is invincible!"

Baroque bowed to the assembled heroes mockingly before turning to his doberman-like support unit. "Crash!"

The two jumped up into the air, Crash twisting and reforming into additional armor around Baroque, ending with the robot's gold highlights turning blood red and his four new demonic wings flaring dramatically.

"That's just the super adaptor, you ass!" Bass accused. "And it's a fucking lame attempt too! Come on Treble, let's show the bastard how it's really done!"

The son of Wily and his wolf-like companion performed a similar fusion, leaving Bass black and purple with metal-feathered wings like a fallen angel.

"And finally, my own original enforcer, perfected from the designs of my ancestor and with the powers of my most aggravating opponents!"

A gleaming blur shot out from the hole behind the repurposed Wily Machine, and when it halted, the group beheld a gleaming polished silver robotic hedgehog.

"What?!" Silver blinked in astonishment at how much it looked like himself. From the style of the spines, to the glowing red markings on its hands and feet identical to the teal lines on Silver's own gloves and shoes, to the red design on its chest like Silver's own chest hair, to the way it hovered in midair supported by a crimson psychokinetic aura. (55)

"METAL SILVER!"

Sonic started clapping. But he wasn't facing Nega as he did so. He was facing Silver.

"Congrats, man! Your very own evil robo-double! You have officially arrived!"

"Hey!" Bass snapped.

"If yours lasts longer than half a minute, we'll add you to the party," Sonic smirked.

Bass paused, and then shrugged. "Oh well, no cake for me then."

"DIE YOU INSOLENT FOOLS!" Nega screamed.

Blues was having a hard time navigating this Zone. Not only was half the terrain like those Yuko Blocks Wily liked to taunt his adversaries with, his sit-rep sensors were giving him a glut of contradictory readings, making it almost impossible to tell what was real and what

wasn't. The group had already been blindsided more than once by Yoku Blocks that were actually enemies in disguise.

Then there were the monochrome phantoms of themselves that charged out of static 'doors' in reality itself. And never when the group was facing them. It was all–

Blues's thoughts trailed off as he spotted a crystal-shaped device with circuits that glowed the same neon blue as everything else in the Zone. And then the device flashed brightly.

Blues staggered as everything around him was obscured by a psychadelic neon blue pattern. His sensors blared with utter gibberish as he tried to orient himself. The only thing he could still make out besides himself was the strange device that had triggered it.

And then the thing shuddered from multiple impacts before detonating in a flash of color that then promptly imploded itself out of existence.

Quint was nearby, his arm cannon pointed at where the device used to be.

"It seems we truly cannot trust our eyes in this 'Zone of Illusion'," NICOLE admitted what all of them had to have been thinking by then. (56)

"Of course you shouldn't trust your eyes," a new voice echoed around them, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. "You should trust mine."

"Almost got it..." Tails murmured as he and Joe worked on the door. "There!"

The attack came out of nowhere. One moment, they were all looking around for the source of the voice and the next NICOLE's holographic body was torn apart as a Yoku Spike manifested in the same space as her chest.

"MOVE!" Sally ordered everyone and none hesitated, and it was good that they did.

Shadow and Blues barely avoided the same fate themselves, but in the next moment the former was brought to a dead halt as he ran face-first into the wall that manifested directly in front of him. Blues barely skidded to a halt before suffering the same. A quick check revealed that the five of them, counting NICOLE's surviving handheld form, were trapped in a large room that had simply appeared around them.

"Shit!" Quint swore as he examined the walls, the sit-rep scans on his shades nearly having an epileptic fit trying to analyze them.

"Spread out!" Sally called. "Try to find a way out o–"

"There isn't one," the voice from before declared from the center of the room. All four figures whipped around to see the blue, cyan, and gray armored figure standing calmly in the center of the room with his arms folded behind his back. His shoulders were a pair of shimmering cubes, much like the Yoku Blocks peppering this Zone, his wrists looked like they'd been shoved through metal gray bowls as they curved back over his forearms away from his white hands, his leg armor sported a pixelating design of blue and cyan, his chest armor held a glowing static television screen, his eyes and the top of his expressionless head glowed brightly and a glowing shimmering cyan Yoku Block hovered directly above him.

"Who the hell are you?" Shadow demanded.

"I have many names," the figure responded calmly. "The Grand Master of Illusion is a rather well-known one I believe. But if you feel that is too long, you may call me Yoku Man." (57)

"Who built you?" Quint glared, and barely stopped himself from reacting badly as Yoku Man vanished from where he stood and reappeared a moment later directly in front of Quint.

"I was born of the Zone itself," Yoku Man declared, bringing his arms out from behind him and placing them over the screen in his chest. That same instant, a blast of pure energy blew Quint back.

The very next moment, Blues tried to strike Yoku Man with his shield, only for the mysterious figure to vanish before the blow landed.

Several Yoku Blocks appeared with a *vooo* over the group's heads and a moment later Yoku Man reappeared standing atop one of them staring down disdainfully with his glowing eyes. "And a power you cannot comprehend."

"Get him!" Shadow yelled, already rushing to attack. His Homing Attack was deflected by one of Yoku Man's energy orbs while Blues and Sally jumped up to attack from behind. Like before, Yoku Man vanished before the blows hit, and Blues and Sally were forced to abort their attacks lest they hit each other and instead land on Yoku Man's former perch. Another set of Yoku Blocks appeared above them, and Yoku Man reappeared atop one of them before the first set vanished unexpectedly, causing Blues and Sally to fall to the floor before their opponent unleashed another attack, this one blocked by Blues's shield. Quint and Blues retaliated with buster shots, scoring a few glancing hits before Yoku Man repeated the maneuver, moving even higher before firing again. It seemed to head straight for Blues again and he readied to block, only for the shot to suddenly turn and strike Sally, sending her sprawling.

And then Yoku Man and his blocks all vanished, leaving the four to pick themselves up.

"What just–"

Vooo-vooo-vooo-voo–

"DOWN!" Quint yelled as he spotted the sudden appearance of Yoku Spikes at chest height closing along the walls, with more appearing to create an ever-shrinking space to stand in. Sally and Blues followed his lead while Shadow jumped onto a wall. The spikes manifested above them, but did not move, before finally stopping with just a small opening in the center of the room.

An opening that Yoku Man reappeared in, standing as calm and assured as ever. "And now I have you, foo–"

"Think again!" Shadow yelled, slamming into the robot from above, causing Yoku Man to explode into a spray of glowing orbs and the Yoku Spikes to vanish as rapidly as they'd appeared. Smirking, he stood in the spot his former opponent had just been in and dusted his hands off. "Heh... Looks like he wasn't much after al–"

"Shadow, look out!" Sally warned, prompting the dark hedgehog to open his eyes just in time to realize that the glowing orbs Yoku Man had burst apart into had reversed direction and were converging on his location.

"ARGH!" Shadow yelled in pain as he was blasted backwards from the simple act of Yoku Man re-manifesting in the same spot.

Silver clashed teal psychokinetic aura to crimson psychokinetic aura as he dueled his robotic counterpart. As dire as the situation was, the whole thing with having his very own evil doppleganger felt... pretty good.

Nearby, Bass was showing Baroque that the latter's smug superiority was... not nearly as deserved as he'd thought. Near the top of the chamber's center, the portal faded in and out at semi-regular intervals with an audible *Voooo*.

As for Nega and the rest of the remaining heroes...

"WILL YOU JUST *DIE* ALREADY?!" Nega fumed as his opponents bounded off of his Egg Plow. Who cared that he'd repurposed it from one of that inferior Wily's creations? It was all his! It was his brilliance that had procured it and his brilliance that would see his victorious!

"Sorry, Neggy," Sonic smirked as he evaded the blades mounted to the front of the device. "Not on our to-do list today."

"Can we interest you in a free butt-whooping instead?" Knuckles grinned as he did the same.

"GAAAAH! ALL WEAPONS: FIRE!"

"Hey Nega!" Rock yelled as he rebounded off the floor with Sakugarne over the barrage, angling the battle jackhammer straight for the cockpit. "In your face!"

Quint grunted as another of Yoku Man's energy shots grazed him and jumped towards the strange being standing high above the floor of his personal deathtrap. He had to make contact. Yoku Man was proving too adept at shrugging off their best shots and vanishing into thin air to avoid stronger blows. If Quint could just get one good touch and scan him with his copy chip, he might be able to find a weakne–

Quint's fingers had barely made contact when Yoku Man and his blocks all vanished, leaving Quint to fall to the floor where Yoku Spikes were already appearing to greet him.

"Gotcha," Blues declared as he grabbed Quint in mid-jump and landed on the wall well above the Yoku Spikes. The moment Yoku Man reappeared, Sally was there to cut his form away into spreading energy orbs and then hightail it before he reformed.

"If you've got any ideas, we're all ears," Blues declared as he let them both fall back to the spike-free floor.

"Actually, I might..." Quint pondered the cursory information his Copy Chip had gotten from the moment of contact as Shadow drew Yoku Man's fire and their opponent vanished.

"It is useless to resist," Yoku Man declared as he reappeared on his first tier of Yoku Blocks. "You do not have the power necessary to defeat me."

"You just say that because you think you took out the only real threat in the first move," Quint replied as he jumped over Yoku Man's energy shot and landed on a different Yoku Block.

"Do tell," Yoku Man intoned before vanishing as the second tier appeared. Quint hopped up and smirked at the reappearing 'master of illusion'.

"If you insist," Quint said as Yoku Man made the motions for his energy shot and threw it at the others. "You could have taken any of us out by surprise with your first move, but you picked the holographic member of our team. And since then, you've just been toying with us."

"I made my abilities clear," Yoku Man replied as he formed the third tier of Yoku Blocks and vanished. He reformed again looking Quint in the eyes after the robot from the future jumped after him. "You are no threat. And I am so lacking in other entertainment."

"You're also a hologram yourself," Quint declared, causing Yoku Man to fumble his energy shot in surprise. "Or at least that body is. That's why we can't hurt you. But another holographic being? Under whatever bizarre rules this Zone of yours possesses? That's actually a threat to you, isn't it?"

"You know not what you speak of..." Yoku Man focused directly on Quint, forming a new energy shot, much larger than any other he'd yet unleashed.

"Or maybe I do," Quint grinned as his armor turned gray and blue, his Copy Chip having gotten just enough information to replicate a weapon for him. The energy shot came for him and Quint dove to the side and fired. "Yoku Attack!"

The energy shot turned to hit Quint, but the weapon Quint had fired – a grayscale hologram of himself – shot straight for a suddenly frightened Yoku Man and spun into a kick that directly struck the Yoku Block hovering over Yoku Man's head. The block exploded in a flash of light and Yoku Man's body wavered like a bad image before vanishing in the glare.

When the light died down, there was no sign of Yoku Man, or of the room they'd battled him in. Only a very familiar glowing object where the block over his head had been that lowered itself towards the ground between the four of them.

"Huh..." Shadow blinked as he took in the object. "Think this is a trick?"

"Negative," NICOLE piped up from Sally's waist. "Even with the potential interference of this Zone, the readings are a match. That is the cyan Chaos Emerald."

"Good news for us," Blues nodded. "Now... where's the exit?"

"Give it up, Eggman Nega!" Rock declared as he stood before the smoking and sparking stolen Wily Machine. "You've lost!"

"SHUT U–"

Nega's tirade was cut off as his elite minions were both thrown into the machine at the same time.

"Okay, I'll admit, the faker was a bit tougher than I expected," Bass grinned as he and Silver joined the three standing before Nega.

"Yours too?" Silver smirked.

"Why you..." Nega fumed, only for the Yoku Portal to suddenly spit out four more of his opponents.

"Hey Quint," Rock waved before handing Sakugarne over, "thanks for the loan."

"Thanks for smashing Nega's face in with it," Quint grinned as he accepted his support unit back.

"So... Nega..." Shadow glared, "do we do this the easy way... or the fun way?"

"I think you're about to have more pressing concerns!" Nega grinned in precisely the way a man in his position *shouldn't* have, and pressed a button that caused the whole machine to glow.

"So that's where you were hiding the Master Emerald!" Knuckles snarled upon recognizing the familiar aura of power.

"Indeed it was!" Nega cackled madly. "And thanks for taking care of the master in the Zone of Illusion for me! Now with the power of the Master Emerald, I can remotely control which dimension it leads to! Including the one containing the mighty Ifrit! Beast of the apocalypse!"

The Yoku Portal shuddered and stabilized before turning an angry red color.

"And what better way to placate the beast for my purposes than with a small snack of chao!" Nega laughed as he dramatically pushed a button in front of him. A panel in the ceiling opened up...

...and a lonely little piece of paper drifted down.

"WHAT?! WHERE ARE MY CHAO?!"

Knuckles glided up to snatch the paper and began to read it once he landed. His snickering made it a bit difficult though. "Dear Mr. Bad Man, We're taking the chao back to their homes where you can't be mean to them anymore, Love Cream, Gemerl, Tails, Mega Woman, and the Chaotix."

"I..." Nega was *actually* foaming at the mouth from hearing that. "Those... You... THIS ISN'T OVER YET!"

Nega slammed a hand on his console, causing his chair to recede into the machine instantly. A moment later and a smaller machine was ejected from the larger's back into the portal.

"You're not getting away this time!/Oh no you don't!" Silver and Bass growled before leaping after him. Shadow and Quint followed without a thought, prompting Metal Silver and Baroque to jump in as well.

"Hey!" Sonic finally got over his surprise at the very sudden turn of events. "Wait for the rest of u–"

"DOWN!" Rock yelled suddenly, shoving the hedgehog to the floor right before the damaged Wily Machine exploded violently.

The G.U.N. Medics were in something of an organized frenzy. One of the elite members of Team Dark, Rouge, had been emergency teleported in by the lupine robot Treble before being left to their care.

Rouge the Bat, widely regarded among G.U.N. as one of their most capable agents, had sustained severe injuries. Her legs hung limply due to what was quickly diagnosed to be a broken spine, one arm was clutched stiffly over her chest in a way that suggested great injury despite seeming fine, and her eyes refused to focus from a combination of pain and shock. And what's more, she was resisting sedation so they could operate. She'd been given two doses already, and still she'd struggled back to consciousness against their efforts to aid her while muttering delirious half-words. They were afraid to administer any further sedation lest they inflict serious harm on her.

"..ease. sa.. .me..."

"We're trying miss Rouge, please allow us!" one of the medics insisted as he tried to calm the mobian woman.

"Not .. O...a," Rouge struggled feebly.

"Miss Rouge, you are the one most in trouble! Let us help you!"

"Sa.. ."

"I'm sorry?" the medic blinked in shock. "Who?"

"Mu... sav..." Rouge seemed to gain a small measure of clarity by sheer force of Will, "O... me... ga..."

"But..." the medic trailed off as his eyes drew towards the stiff arm over Rouge's chest. Was it his imagination, or had something moved beneath it? "I would love to aid agent Omega, but I..."

The medic trailed off as slowly, stiffly, Rouge released the grip on whatever she was holding and a small flicky bird, ruffled from being held so tightly, crawled out.

"I..." every G.U.N. personnel present found their mind racing at the implications. Not that Omega was powered by a small animal in the same manner as a badnik, but that said animal was now outside the robot body. A body that would gleefully take on an entire armed tank battalion and call it a warm-up. "I will do what I can."

Rouge smiled hazily before finally succumbing to her sedation.

"It's no use, Nega!" Silver declared the moment he landed, barely sparing a look at the burned-out husk of a city around them and the infernal glow caused by a ground turned partially molten by whatever had destroyed the landscape. "Your reign of terror is over before it begins!"

"Heh," Bass grinned at the strange two-legged walker mech that Nega had bailed through the portal in as Shadow and Quint landed nearby. "Literally if you think about it. There's no way you can take us all in that stupid tin-can of you–"

Bass pitched forwards suddenly as something struck him in the back square between the wings of his super adaptor form and sent him face-first into the ground.

"Did you forget about us, yesterday's model?" Baroque spoke cockily from atop Bass's back before jumping out of the way as Quint began shooting. A moment later and Quint, along with Silver and Shadow had been sent sprawling by a crimson psychokinetic field as Metal Silver joined his partner.

"OHOHOHOHOHO!" Nega laughed. "Excellent work you two! Now, keep them busy while I secure the Ifrit!"

"Affirmative," Metal Silver intoned.

"No problem, boss," Baroque smiled confidently.

"Okay..." Bass growled at his double as he got to his feet. "That's it... You die now..."

"Try it, you has-been," Baroque mocked, inciting Bass to shoot forwards in a flying charge, only to be caught in the psychokinetic field of Metal Silver.

"When I get out, I'm gon–" Bass's threat was cut off as Baroque kicked him in the face. But as Nega's enforcer charged up his super adaptor-enhanced arm cannon for a finishing blow, he was grasped by Silver's teal psychokinetic aura and thrown aside.

"Can you handle these two?" Quint asked, getting a nod from Silver before turning to Shadow. "Come on, we can't let Nega get his hands on the Ifrit!"

"No problem," Shadow smirked. "Just make sure you keep up."

"Sakugarne! Super adaptor!" Quint yelled, and in a flash of light he was clad in the Duo-like armor of Sakugarne's super adaptor mode.

"There's no way we'll let yo–" Baroque moved to block Quint and Shadow from pursuing his master, only to take a sharp kick from Bass while Silver similarly prevented Metal Silver from intervening.

"Shut up and fight, you fucking knock-off," Bass sneered.

"Everyone okay?" Rock called out as he got to his feet, ignoring his internal alarms, and examined the damage. The room was as intact as could be expected after an explosion and he could see others stirring. A bit worse for wear, but generally intact. It probably helped that Blues had shielded Sally (and by extension NICOLE) and Knuckles the same way Rock himself had shielded Sonic.

The Wily Machine was a wreck, with large pieces of shrapnel strewn about the remains of the room, some of the biggest embedded in what was left of the walls.

"We're fine," Blues reported, "which is more than can be said for the portal."

Rock looked to where his brother was pointing and say the shredded remains of the Yoku Parts, broken beyond any hope of repair.

"Damn it!" Knuckles fumed, slamming an angry fist into the floor. "Nega got away with the Master Emerald and now we have no way to follow him!"

Nega laughed loudly as he increased thrust on the Egg Walker's afterburners. The plan might not have gone as smoothly as he'd have liked, but he'd gotten what he wanted anyway: passage to the home Zone of the mighty Ifrit with the means to control the beast in

tow. Sure, fitting the Master Emerald into the relatively small Egg Walker while leaving room for himself had been problematic, especially after all the other modifications he'd made to the machine, but he had it. And with his enforcers keeping the heroes busy, there was no one who could stop him now!

"OHOHOHOHOHO! AT LAST! EVERYTHING I WANTED IS WITHIN REACH!"

"Stop right there, Nega!" one of the two most infuriating voices yelled from behind him.

"What?! That's... Those incompetent...!" Nega sputtered as he saw the form of that most hated robot in his enhanced mode chasing after him with that black hedgehog. "GAH! I'VE COME TOO FAR TO LOSE NOW! EAT EGG DEATH LASERS!"

As he fired the few weapons his machine had, he opened communication to his enforcers.

"I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU TWO TO STOP *ALL* PURSUIT!"

"Apologies master," Baroque replied, but we–gah!"

"NO EXCUSES! GET OVER HERE AND STOP THEM RIGHT NOW!"

"Your earlier fortune will not be repeated," Metal Silver declared as he and Silver clashed psychokinesis to psychokinesis, each exchange flaring in a corona of teal and red. "I am your superior in every way."

"As if!" Silver shot back with a confident grin. "Even if Nega did make you stronger and faster, you don't have anywhere near the experience I do!"

"Irrelevant," Metal Silver parried another of Silver's strikes. "I have all the data my master has gathered on you throughout your many clashes. I know all your abilities and techniques. Whatever skills you have, I can predict. I know everything you are going to do before you do it."

Silver blocked an incoming psychokinetic blast with his own and glared straight back at his double.

"Maybe you do know everything I'm going to do," Silver admitted as the two mental energies struggled against each other, "but that's not going to help you because by the same token, I know everything *you're* going to do. Strange, isn't it?" (58)

Metal Silver's optics flared as he tried to surge his psychokinetic aura, only for Silver to do exactly the same thing.

"Rrrrrr–"

BOOM!

The explosion of power blew them both back, Silver recovering in midair as his robotic counterpart did the same.

The two stared each other down, and then Metal Silver suddenly turned and shot off.

"Hey! Get the fuck back here, you fake!" Bass yelled and Silver spotted Baroque flying off in the same direction.

"Nega must have called them back!" Silver realized as he began chasing after the two. "We can't let them get away!"

"Way ahead of you!" Bass yelled, the thrusters under his wings flaring as he joined the chase.

Quint swore as his giant fist merely clanged off of the mech's green armor, barely leaving a dent after a full-power strike, and jumped off before the thing's weapons could lock onto him.

"Ohohohohoho! It's not going to be that easy you wretched robot!" Nega laughed, not slowing down in the least.

"Try this, then!" Shadow yelled as he landed on the spot Quint had just vacated, glowing with a crimson aura. "CHAOS BLAST!"

The explosion of Chaos Force blasted the walker-style mech away from Shadow even faster than it had already been flying, striking the ground in several places, but ultimately barely scratching the paint job.

"YOU MADE ME SPILL MY DRINK!" Nega roared as he returned fire.

"Invest in a cupholder then!" Quint yelled as he returned fire with the Rainbow Beam, the Jet Missile, and the Tank Arsenal. All three of which clanged harmlessly off the thick armor. It was more than evident that, as lacking in offense as Nega's final machine was, it had more than enough defense to make up for it.

"We're getting nowhere fast," Shadow noted as he fell into step alongside Quint. "We have to stop him before he finds the Ifrit and does... whate–GAH!"

Shadow pitched forwards suddenly in a spray of rings as a plasma blast took him full in the back. Quint caught the dark hedgehog as he bounced off the ground and risked a look over his shoulder. He saw Baroque and Metal Silver approaching from behind with Silver and Bass hot on their heels.

"As if we didn't have enough troubles," Shadow grunted as he recovered and jumped back into the chase. "What else can go–"

"RROOOOOAAAAARRRR!"

"The Ifrit could make its location known to Nega," Quint suggested blandly to the swearing hedgehog as he fired backwards at their pursuit.

"OHOHOHOHOHO! WHAT LUCK! SURELY THIS IS A SIGN THAT I AM FAVORED OVER ALL!"

"Surely it's a sign that you're completely nuts!" Shadow yelled back.

"Watch thy tongue with the master, base creature!" Baroque yelled as he continued firing on them.

"RROOOOOAAAAARRRR!"

"The Ifrit's getting closer!" Quint yelled, even as Baroque stopped firing his arm cannon and began charging up.

"Targets: Acquired," the monotone of Metal Silver sounded.

"Acquire this!" Bass yelled, clotheslining the robotic hedgehog from behind in a burst of speed.

"Prepare for annihilation!" Baroque yelled, pointing his charging buster skyward. "Vanish int–"

"Shut up already!" Silver yelled, slamming Baroque in the back just as he fired a massive blast skyward.

"Ah, crap," Shadow cursed as the massive ball of energy split high above and began raining blasts back down on them. He and Quint were forced to stop pursuing Nega's mech in order to avoid the energy rain.

Baroque twisted around and backhanded Silver away from him while Bass managed to pin Metal Silver to the ground and point an arm cannon at the metal hedgehog's head.

"Psycho Blast," Metal Silver intoned right before a flare of psychokinetic energy similar to the Chaos Blast burst forth and threw

Bass off of him.

Quint swore as he spotted Nega gaining distance on them. "We need to follo–"

"RROOOOOAAAAARRRR!"

"Shit," Quint looked up at the source of the even closer roar and saw the massive draconic form of the Ifrit, colored like stone red from molten heat, approached from above.

BOOOOM!

The ground shuddered as the Ifrit, a molten fire dragon the size of a small office building (59) landed between the group and Nega.

"Damn..." Bass looked at the Ifrit. "Is anyone else feeling the power coming off that thing? It doesn't look like much, but... Damn."

Quint nodded, thinking back on the hazy memories he had of the alternate timeline where he was created to fight Iblis. From what his readings were telling him, the Ifrit was at least as strong, if not stronger. How much more would it have become if Nega had managed to feed it a room full of captured chao?

"Okay..." Silver started. "We just have to fight the Ifrit too... How hard could tha–"

"RROOOOOAAAAARRRR!" the Ifrit's cry drowned out Silver's speech, but instead of trying to attack them like the four expected, it turned and unleashed a blast of flames towards Nega's mech that turned stone molten on contact.

"I vote we let the Ifrit handle Nega for a bit while we take out the peanut gallery first," Shadow proposed. "All in favo–ARGH!"

Shadow was once more blindsided by an energy blast from behind, prompting the other three to turn their attention from the Ifrit back towards Nega's enforcers.

They saw Baroque with a smoking arm cannon pointed at where Shadow had been standing, his four demonic wings flared behind him as the arm cannon changed back into a hand. Also behind him was the unfolded form of Metal Silver partway through joining with Baroque. As they watched, what had been Metal Silver's head attached to Baroque's helmet, giving him hedgehog-like spikes. Metal Silver's body attached to Baroque's, turning the black parts of the robot's black and red armor silver in color, with his hands gaining sharp claws on the fingers, and adding a third pair of demonic wings. And in Baroque's other hand was the yellow Chaos Emerald. As the transformation finished, Baroque's chest opened up and he placed the emerald in the interior space.

"You won't have to worry about the Ifrit or the master," 'Silver Baroque' sneered. "Because your worthless lives end now!"

"Big talk for a wannabe!" Bass growled, charging the latest transformation of his replica, firing rapidly. The shots were absorbed by a crimson psychokinetic barrier, but Bass kept charging and when he got within arm's reach, swung with all his might.

Only for his arm to be caught by Silver Baroque's clawed hand. Undaunted, Bass swung his other arm for a cross, and that was caught as well.

"Big talk for one who has been disarmed," Silver Baroque taunted with a smug look.

"The hell are yo–AARRGGGHH!" Bass screamed as, with simultaneous application of raw strength and crimson psychokinesis, both of his arms were torn off at the shoulder, and a moment later were used as makeshift clubs to smack him away.

"Bass!" Shadow yelled in fury as he got to his feet. "CHAOS CONTRO–urk..."

Shadow had intended to appear so close to Silver Baroque that the robot couldn't defend himself. He meant to appear and strike the

robot in the same instant. He hadn't intended to appear with Silver Baroque's knee in his gut. Nor did he intend to be struck aside with the severed limbs of his own partner.

"Silver," Quint began.

"On it," Silver nodded, glowing with psychokinetic power as Quint charged Silver Baroque in an aura of energy matching the Comet Dash.

"Heh..." Silver Baroque turned to meet the charge and simply held up a single hand, glowing with crimson power that formed a barrier. "It's no u–"

The barrier was disrupted by Silver's own teal psychokinetic power right as Quint's giant glowing fist slammed into it, through it, and into Silver Baroque's face.

"GAH!" the super-enhanced enforcer cried in pain as he rocketed back from the impact and bounced off the ground once before righting himself with his wings. "You'll pay for that, yo–"

Silver Baroque was forced to cut his threat short in order to sidestep a Yo-Yo Cutter and then block a follow-up strike from Quint's giant fist as he closed the distance between them, Silver Baroque's attempts to bring his crimson psychokinesis to bear being disrupted by Silver at every turn. (60)

"You wretche–"

BOOMBOOMBOOM! went the spray of Nitro Blast as it exploded in Silver Baroque's face.

"ARGH!"

"Great Impact!" Quint's giant fist glowed and exploded with force as the next blow landed.

"EEEYYAAAAAHHHHRRR!" Silver Baroque screamed incoherently from the blow as he lashed out with crimson psycho-claws, tearing gouges in Quint's armor in return for the injuries he'd suffered.

"CHAOS SPEAR!"

"PSYCHO CUTTER!"

"INSOLENT WRETCHES!" Silver Baroque thrust both of his arms out and unleashed bure waves of crimson energy to intercept the incoming attacks from both Shadow and Silver. But in doing so, he left himself open to Quint who decided to blast him full in the face with Whirlpool Man's Water Cannon.

Silver Baroque shook off the water and slashed an incoming monochrome Quint in two, and looked puzzled when the figure simply faded away to reveal a large hammer spinning at his face.

Clang

"ETCHENDEL!" Nega's enforcer spat incoherently as he clawed in Quint's general direction. His arm was caught in Quint's giant palm while the future robot's other arm swung at him in a powerful hook. Silver Baroque caught that fist with his own remaining hand and glared at his opponent's shades. "THIS IS THE END!"

Silver Baroque leaned back hard enough that the grapple with Quint pulled the other off-balance and kicked off, tucking in his legs for a powerful double kick that would surel–

"PSYCHO SHOCK!"

Silver Baroque fumed as his systems froze in place.

"NOW BASS!" Shadow yelled.

"WAY AHEAD OF YOU!"

Nega's ultimate enforcer managed to look up right as a foot encased in energy slammed straight through his torso, shattering his armor and blasting the yellow Chaos Emerald out of place.

"Y–"

CRUNCH

The second energy-enhanced foot crushed Silver Baroque's head beyond all repair.

"Damnit, now I've got my foot stuck in loser," Bass grumbled as he tried to dislodge his foot from the hole it had punched straight through the other robot's chest.

"Here, let me help," Shadow offered to his currently armless partner as he approached. Nearby, Quint shook his hands free of Silver Baroque's arms, the appendages having been ripped out from the force of Bass's impact with their owner, and looked around.

"Well, we at least got the yellow Chaos Emerald out of the deal," Silver noted as he fished the gem out from under the remains of their opponent. "Now we just need to deal with Ne–"

"DOWN!" Quint yelled suddenly as a wall of force slammed into Silver, Shadow, and Bass, sending them tumbling. Looking up, Silver saw Quint's giant hand outstretched in a palm strike right before a massive column of flame engulfed him and the area the rest of them had just been standing in.

"QUINT!" Silver yelled, scrambling to his feet and trying to rush forwards, only for Shadow to restrain him.

"Don't be stu..." Shadow's admonishment trailed off as the gout of flames died down to reveal an intact Quint, armor glowing brightly from the heat and his feet stuck in the partially molten ground beneath him, turning towards the source of the attack even as he brought up a Nail Shield to defend himself with.

He fired the sharp projectiles upwards even as his target descended far too quick–

CRUNCH

"a..." Silver stared in shock at the foot of the Ifrit embedded in the broken ground where Quint had just been a moment before.

"Well... shit..." Bass summed up the scene as he looked upwards and beheld the head of the beast. Blood ran down the creature's forehead from underneath the edges of the Master Emerald that had been embedded in its skull. And behind the Master Emerald was the mecha Nega had been riding, reconfigured into a device that punctured into the Ifrit's neck to provide the signals to its body that the beast's brain no longer could.

"YES! YES!" The broadcast voice of Eggman Nega laughed dementedly. "TREMBLE BEFORE ME!" (61)

Amy looked up from where Rotor, Bunnie, and Antoine were watching the full-scale space war between Drs. Wily and Eggman.

"Does anyone else feel like something bad just happened?" she asked.

"Probably nothin', Amy-girl," Bunnie shrugged. "Ah mean, Roll-girl and tha others reported in that Nega's plans are pretty much kaput at this point, so it's likely just nerves from tha docs goin' ta war with each other and everyone else off on assignment with that othah army and all."

"Eet eez as you are sayink, mah love," Antoine agreed. "Ze othairs shall beink fine as zey always are. Zere eez nothink to be ze worryink about."

"Other than the doctors causing collateral damage," Rotor noted.

"Twenty says tha first thing we have ta stop is one a' Eggman's ships bein' shot out a' tha sky but still in one piece, sugah."

"Yeah? Twenty five says it's one of Wily's."

Amy watched her friends wager at what would force their involvement as the feeling she'd gotten failed to go away. She had no idea why, but she was certain something had gone very wrong.

"aa..." Silver stared, unaware of everything around him save for the sight right before his eyes.

"Bass, take Silver and the yellow Emerald and use Chaos Control to get the hell out of here."

The massive molten-skinned leg of the Ifrit stuck into the ground where Quint had just been standing after saving them all from a blast of the draconic beast's flames.

"Like hell I'm running! I can still fight!"

The leg lifted up, agonizingly slowly to Silver's eyes.

"Halt unknown lifeform! State your business!"

"Hi Quint, I'm Silver!"

"How do you know my name?"

"The doc told me! Are you really going to help stop Iblis/Eggman Nega?"

"Of course I will."

Stuck to the bottom of the monstrous foot, alongside partially molten rubble, were the shattered and half-molten remains of the robotic champion of the future.

"aaa..."

"I thought I told you to stop following me!"

"But I want to help fight!"

"Organics like yourself have no place on the battlefield! I can't afford to babysit a child like you while on my mission!"

"I can help though! I'm strong!"

"Damnit Bass! Quint's dead, Silver's having a breakdown, you have no arms, and any moment now Nega's going to get bored gloating about how invincible he is! I need you to take the Emeralds back to everyone else just in case all I can do is slow him down!"

"Nice... nice save kid... Thanks... I... I'm sorry about what I said earlier."

"I told you I was strong!"

"Yeah, you're strong... for a child. You're also reckless, undisciplined, and unskilled. You want to tag along, fine, but you will have training. You will also follow my lead until further notice. You will do what I say when I say it, no backtalk, no complaints, and no excuses. Understood?"

"Thank you!"

"What part of that made you think it was acceptable to hug me?!"

"aaaa..." There was a pressure building in the back of his skull. How long had it been there?

"Slow me down?"

"Shit..."

"The only way you'll delay me is by making your death as entertaining as possible."

"I'm honestly amazed. When I insisted you get training, I didn't actually think you'd ever be ready for anything but emergency backup."

"Thank you, brother."

"For the love of Wily... What have I told you about calling me that?"

"I know... but after my parents died... and you... I dunno... I always wanted a sibling..."

"...Fine. If it means that much to you... Let's go... brother."

"After all, I've finally rid myself of that idiot Wily's annoying creation and in a few moments, you all as well!"

"You want to what?"

"We would like to make Soleanna our base of operations while here in the past, princess, at least until the threat of Eggman Nega is ended."

"But... I don't even know you... At least, I don't think so."

"Princess, it may seem fantastic, but we have met before. In an alternate timeline due to Solaris–"

"Stop."

"Princess?"

"I... I believe you. That name is not known to anyone outside the royal family. Not after... it... didn't pan out. I would know your names though, before I agree to anything."

"I am Quint, Special Variant Number - 001, created by Dr. Wily roughly two hundred years from now. And this is my brother-in-arms, Silver the Hedgehog."

"aaaaa..." the pressure was unbearable now. It hurt to hold it in.

"Bass, take the Emeralds and go now!"

"TOO LATE!"

The only thing to do was let it all out.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA **AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"**

"Man, I hate sitting around here while those four get to have all the fun," Sonic groused as Rock and NICOLE fiddled with the remains of the Yoku parts, trying to see what, if anything, could be salvaged. It wasn't looking good.

"I hear ya," Knuckles nodded in agreement. "The Ifrit's always a pretty fun challenge, especially when you don't have to worry about collateral damage."

"You two have a definition of 'fun' that I suspect isn't shared by most of the multiverse," Blues noted idly as he adjusted Sally's splint.

"Hey, steady challenges in the Loops are nothing to sneeze at, Rad Red 2."

"Be careful what you wish for," Rock piped up. "The first time I faced the set of robot masters Nega stole, they came with an unfinished prototype that nearly took me apart with its bare hands. I won, barely, but the strain on my arm cannon from the fight caused it to overload and blow up."

"Damn Big Blue," Sonic whistled, "I'd love to go a few rounds with someone who can give you a run for your mon–"

"–ROL!" the conversation was interrupted as a damaged Bass, clutching the yellow and purple Chaos Emeralds between the wings of his super adaptor, appeared.

"Bass!" Sally cried out upon seeing the Black Prince's state. "What happened?"

"Nega took control of the Ifrit and killed Quint," Bass grunted, his wings opening to reveal that not only were both of his arms missing at the shoulder, but that his chest armor was cracked like it had taken a direct hit from a boulder. "Then Silver lost it. Shadow stayed behind to stop him. Ordered me to get you all the Emeralds in case he failed."

"Then where's Silver?" NICOLE wondered. "If Shadow stayed behind to stop Nega, then why didn't you bring Silver with you?"

"Fuck Nega..." Bass grunted as cracks in his armor lit up from the sparks of internal damage. His wings flexed open and a pair of objects recognizable as Shadow's inhibitor rings clattered to the ground. "Shadow stayed behind to stop *Silver* ."

Shadow grunted as he felt the Chaos Force surge through him like liquid flames, painfully knitting together the humongous bruise his torso had become after the explosion of psychokinetic energy Silver had unleashed on anything and everything in the vicinity. It was almost like going Super in a way, except that where a Chaos Emerald transformation took all the energy and compacted it into a form where it was tightly controlled, the unbound Chaos Force racing through his body bled out into a potent aura that could easily lash out unbidden at anything Shadow himself wasn't actively empowering with it. And if he hadn't trained extensively in its use, or if he faltered in his hard-earned control, it could just as easily burn his own body out as destroy his foes.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Super forms were the power taken and forged into a controlled and elegant weapon. The raw Chaos Force that ran rampant with the removal of his limiter rings was more like a bomb that wouldn't stop exploding. Powerful, yes, but unfocused.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Much like Silver's berserk psychokinesis at the moment. The backwash from the teal energy blows Silver was landing on the puppetized Ifrit were causing massive shockwaves that battered the already abused structures around them and numerous buildings were starting to buckle and groan as–

RRRRUUUUMMMMBBLLLEEE

"GET OFF OF ME YOU–"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

There went the first one. More were beginning to follow. And any time now, Silver would either realize the inherent weakness that Eggman Nega's grotesque control of the Ifrit had created, or he'd just get lucky an–

"IT'S USELESS TO RESIST YOU WORTHLESS HEDGEHOG!" Nega screamed from his command unit attached to the back of the Ifrit's skull, just behind the Master Emerald embedded in the beast's forehead.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"THE IFRIT IS INVINCIBLE! I WILL DESTROY YOU JUST LIKE I DESTROYED THAT WORTHLESS TRASH OF A RO– ***CRUNK***

Shadow winced at the sight of the imploded hunk of scrap that had just been unceremoniously crushed by Silver's psychokinetic aura like an empty soda can. Just from appearances alone, there wasn't enough volume left inside the thing for Nega to have escaped as

anything more substantial than chunky salsa. With the destruction of the machine animating its form, the Ifrit fell like a puppet with its strings cut, already dead from Nega's actions.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

And Silver still wasn't stopping, blasting the corpse of the Ifrit with enough force to create a localized earthquake. It was just as Shadow feared. Silver had gone full-on berserker and if he wasn't stopped now, there was no guarantee that his rampage would be confined to this dimension.

"CHAOS SPEAR!"

"RRAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

'Fantastic,' Shadow thought as Silver blasted him with a massive bolt of power, and he defended in kind. Berserk Psychokinesis crashed against Chaos Force in an explosion that collapsed several more nearby structures from the shockwave. *'I have his attention. Now what?'*

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" Silver charged at Shadow in a massive aura of psychokinetic potential. Shadow responded in kind with an equal aura of Chaos Force.

BOOOOOOOM!

"SNAP OUT OF IT SILVER!" Shadow yelled as their two auras pushed against each other like two powerful magnets pointing like poles at each other and trying to force contact. **"THIS ISN'T LIKE YOU!"**

"WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW?!" Silver's aura suddenly flared and, in his surprise at getting a coherent statement, Shadow failed to respond in kind and was thrown back.

He recovered quickly and met Silver's retaliating volley in kind, teh two beginning to blast away at each other with ranged energy attacks.

"I KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE ALONE OUTSIDE YOUR TIME!" Shadow yelled at Silver. **"I KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO TRY AND LIVE IN A TIME ALIEN TO ME! I KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO LOSE SOMEONE IMPORTANT TO YOU! I KNOW WHAT YOU'R–"**

"YOU KNOW *NOTHING!* " Silver screamed and rushed forwards so suddenly that Shadow was caught off-guard. Even though he defended with his aura, the intensity of the strike sent him flying back at high speeds, plowing through building after building on his impromptu flight. By the time he got control of himself, he was sure he'd been knocked several miles.

And Silver was coming in hot for the follow-up strike.

"YOUR PAST WAS REAL!"

The next blow was much like the first, only a bit better defended against.

"YOUR TIME WITH MARIA HAPPENED!"

The third was even better blocked, but Shadow was still finding it hard to recover enough to retaliate.

"OUR WORLD REMEMBERS YOU!"

Shadow managed a good defense this time and remained roughly where he was.

"IT DOESN'T REMEMBER ME!" Silver yelled as he began throwing punches and kicks wreathed in his teal aura, and Shadow blocked as best he could with his own limbs wreathed in his crimson aura. **"DID YOU KNOW THAT IF I TRY TO GO BACK TO MY FUTURE AFTER SOLARIS THAT THE LOOP ENDS FOR ME?! I CAN'T GO**

BACK TO MY FUTURE BECAUSE IT ISN'T THERE ANYMORE! THE TIME I STRIVE TO DEFEND IS ALWAYS WIPED AWAY LIKE A BAD DREAM! BECAUSE MY TIME ISN'T REAL ANYMORE! NOR IS ANYONE FROM IT! NONE OF THEM EVER ACTUALLY LIVED OR DIED! I'M AN OUTCAST FROM A TIME THAT WAS NEVER THERE FOREVER DOOMED TO CHASE A NIGHTMARE WHO WAS NEVER CREATED!"

"SILVER IT–"

"DON'T YOU GET IT?!" Silver screamed in mad fury as his aura seemed to draw in on itself and compact in a way that made Shadow's eyes widen. **"I! DON'T! *EXIST!* "**

Silver's aura suddenly burst from him with the force of a nuclear bomb.

Shadow compacted his own aura to his limit to try and weather the blast, but the sheer force of it still tore at him even as it leveled buildings for miles around. But, just as Shadow began to wonder if he'd have to make his apologies in the next Loop, the blast ended and he saw Silver barely floating in the air, having put close to everything he had into the blast.

Shadow needed no further invitation. He zipped up as fast as possible and buried a fist in Silver's gut. The future hedgehog's eyes widened for a moment before rolling back in his head as he lost consciousness.

"Sorry about this," Shadow coughed out, realizing that he wasn't in much better shape for having weathered the blast than Silver was for unleashing it. Catching the other hedgehog and slinging him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, Shadow cast his senses out to find the Master Emerald. Given that Silver had blasted most, if not all, of the relevant landmarks to rubble, such measures were necessary.

He found it fairly quickly and began moving in its direction as fast as he was comfortable with. It was his only ticket back at the moment

after all.

"I'm sorry to say this, but you need serious help Silver," he told his unconscious passenger. "I just hope we don't have to wait for another fused Loop to get you it."

"Hey guys," Sonic greeted half-heartedly as he and the others walked back into the Sky Patrol, "how are things looking with the docs?"

"They stopped shooting at each other rather suddenly and both of their fleets limped off to lick their wounds, or whatever," Rotor reported as he turned around to look at the entering group and the generally morose expressions on all of them. "And now I'm wondering what happened to you all."

"Well, it went like this, Rote..."

Vanilla's worry was written clear on her face. And how could it not be? Her daughter had come back from her latest adventure an inconsolable wreck, bawling about a friend of hers. She'd immediately done what any mother would and wrapped her daughter in an embrace and held her until she'd cried herself to sleep.

And now Gemerl was telling her everything that had happened on the latest adventure, and about the friend who had fallen in battle.

"Well..." Knuckles sighed heavily. "The Master Emerald's back safe and sound."

"Yep," Blues nodded.

"Nega's never going to be a problem again, at least this Loop."

"Correct."

"So why the hell does it feel like we lost?"

Shadow winced as he walked down the G.U.N. hallway. His limiter rings were back in place, but they didn't help the fact that he was more-or-less one giant bruise after this last mission. Between Baroque, Nega, and Silver, he supposed he should count himself lucky he could move under his own power despite being only a few bandages short of a mummy costume.

It was far better shape than what Rouge or Omega were in.

Almost as if the thought had guided him, Shadow found himself in the rehab room, watching Rouge try and re-learn how to walk. Her spinal injury had been too much for the G.U.N. medics, and she'd flat-out refused any of the regeneration potions stored in either of their subspace pockets.

"Look, Shadow, honestly I think we take too much for granted in the Loops sometimes. Sure, we've got a bunch of cool tricks saved up, but... We forget that things have consequences... because sooner or later we can pretty much fix anything that happens to us, sometimes even death if the Loop didn't reset."

She'd ultimately agreed to what was essentially a cybernetic lower body brace that plugged straight into her nervous system and bypassed the injury.

"It's kind of lazy of us, really. We lose sight of the risks, lose sight of the cost if we fail. Forget that, eventually, it's not going to reset all nice and easy anymore and we're going to have to live with whatever we do then. So, no. No easy way out for this bat. Not this Loop. I don't care if I'm stuck in a wheelchair until Loop end, I'm doing this the hard way."

Omega... was a flicky. No more robot body at all, and it was obvious to everyone that the bird, in complete opposition to any other animal trapped in one of Eggman's creations, missed it terribly. Any time the

bird wasn't accompanying Rouge on her rehab regimen, he was sneaking into the armored mech simulators and trying to train himself to operate the things. Despite the fact that all of them were designed for beings several dozen times his size.

"How the hell did you manage to lose both your arms?" Wily grumbled as he set about repairing Bass. He focused on the work, not quite willing to confront the thought that the future hack who fancied himself a scientist had actually destroyed one of the creations he called 'son', and nearly done the same to the other. He wasn't sure how he'd feel about that if he let himself.

"Nega may have been a twit at making anything original," Bass snorted, "but he wasn't *completely* hopeless. What about Eggface?"

"Your repairs are more important than Ivo's delusions of grandeur," Dr. Wily huffed, continuing his work. He'd have to fashion completely new limbs at the very least. And making them exactly the same as before struck him as a bit pointless. Hmm... Maybe it was time to try some of the upgrades he'd been thinking about? "We'll get to him soon enough."

"Maybe sooner than you think, pops."

Silver stared out the window of Soleanna Castle, feeling more lost than he ever had. Baseline hadn't driven him this low, nor had the worst the Loops had thrown at him. So why had this had such an effect on him?

"Silver?"

As if he didn't know.

"Silver," the voice of Princess Elise cut into his thoughts, "please talk to me."

"I don't have anything to say," the hedgehog from a nonexistent future monotoned.

"I highly doubt that."

"Please, just... go away."

"No."

Silver felt his hands clench in frustration. Couldn't they all just leave him be in his misery?

"Talk to me, Silver, please."

"I can't... You wouldn't understand..."

"Try me anyway."

"No... You don't get it... None of you get it..."

"Probably not, but that won't change if you never tell us."

"Fine..." Silver growled, too spent to keep arguing. "What would you say if I told you that time was on an infinite repeat? That the force that runs all of creation is so busted that if it tried to actualize anything past a certain point that it would break apart and everything would cease to exist?"

There was no reply.

"What if I told you that the cutoff point was about two hundred years before I'll ever be born? That this force can't visualize anything past that point clearly? That it can't remember who I am or where I come from aside from some idea it has that I come from the future and land smack in the middle of the time it does know about? That every time it restarts the future it can't remember is different? The history, the people, the politics, the technology level, the morality, all of it different except for the fact that I exist and have to fight some damn nightmare all the way back to this time. A future that doesn't really

exist, all to justify sending me back over and over to a time that couldn't care less about who I am or where I come from."

Still silence.

"No one knows! No one ever even cares to ask! I can't even remember who the hell my parents are most times! Because they're always different! What does it matter if I remember when no one else does?! If only you remember something and no one else does, how the hell do you know it ever even happened?! Maybe I'm a sapient paradox and I just *imagined* that I had a life! Imagined my friends and family! Who can even say that I was real? Or will be real?" (62)

"Quint could."

"AND NEGA JUST OFFED HIM LIKE IT WAS NOTHING!" Silver roared, his voice hoarse and thick with grief. "THE ONE TIME ANYONE ELSE COULD REMEMBER WHAT MY LIFE WAS LIKE AND THEY'RE GONE! THIS WAS THE FIRST LOOP THAT SOMEONE OTHER THAN NEGA CAME BACK WITH ME! AND HE'S GONE! HE'S NOT A LOOPER! EVEN IF BY SOME CHANCE WE MEET AGAIN, HE WON'T REMEMBER ME OR THIS LIFE! FOR ONCE, I FELT REAL AND IT'S GONE! NO ONE ELSE WILL EVER REMEMBER!"

Silver broke down after that, not caring who saw him weep. Let them.

A hand was placed gently on his shoulder. "Tell me."

Silver sniffed long and pitifully instead of asking for clarification.

"Tell me everything," Elise insisted. "All of it. From your earliest memory to now. Your parents, your friends, meeting Quint, fighting Nega, all of it. At least this life anyway."

"Why...?"

"So I can remember with you of course."

"But you'll just forget... Like any other nonlooper..."

"So tell me again the next time. Tell me about that life, or this one. Or any of them you care to share. Tell me about your friends, your family, your losses, your triumphs. Tell me so that I can remember with you and that your life can be made real once more. I promise that, even if I don't remember any of the times before, I will always listen."

Silver looked up, past the teary blur in his eyes, to see the kind smile of Elise staring back at him. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'm your friend, Silver," Elise said. "And like someone said to me: I will always be your friend. From now until the end of the world, and all over again if necessary."

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0) I was informed that my earlier instances of the man's name were incorrect. It is Leonard, not Leonardo. I blame my childhood love of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. I will at some point go back and correct the previous instances.

1) You can pick your jaws up now.

2) Is 'Top Ten Nicest Guys in the World' a thing? If not, it should be.

3) Quint in a nutshell: All of Rock's pragmatism, but without his moral restraint.

4) I am fully confident that someone, somewhere, has attempted to pull this.

5) The cheer that followed *might* have been heard from space.

6) If you know the name 'Battle Bird Armada' you can probably guess how that noodle incident went.

7) aka Victoria's Secret Compartment.

8) Jessica Rabbit is a sultry 'adult' (i.e. her style of 'bunny' is decidedly of the 'playboy' variety) toon in the movie 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' and the wife of the title character. The ability being displayed however is from the book 'Who Censored Roger Rabbit' that the movie is loosely based on. The ability is known as the doppelganger and works a bit like Kage Bunshin in that the duplicates are used for dangerous and potentially lethal stunts (as toons in the book universe are otherwise mortal). I don't recall more than one being produced by any given toon at a time, and how long they last (and how accurate they are) depends on the concentration put into them. Most disintegrate on their own after a few hours but Roger's own duplicate in the book lasts several days, which allows him to help solve Roger's murder (yes, the doppelganger outlives the original by a few days).

9) She knew the name. She was just *snicker* 'distracted' *snicker*.

10) Such a realization is a very bitter pill for any woman to swallow.

11) KHfan21: Where the hell did that come from?!

wildrook: There are some questions best left unanswered, but it was one heck of a party.

12) Bus~ted!

13) This little exchange by Zerorock41.

14) You know, I've wondered this exact thing many a time.

15) One part Sonic Rivals 2, one part fan game Mega Man Unlimited by MegaPhilX. I shall call it... Mega Sonic Rivals Unlimited!

16) Of course not. That's Cream.

17) Well, we've got our teams set now. Sonic/Rock, Tails/Roll, Knuckles/Blues, Shadow/Omega (with Rouge spotting), Ray/Joe,

Cream/Gemerl (with Cheese tagging along), Sally/NICOLE, Silver/Quint, and apparently Metal Sonic/Bass for the opposing side.

18) Fun fact: When making his fan game, MegaPhilX decided to number his original robot masters as part of the SWN series, or Special Wily Numbers. Bass is part of this series as SWN-001, and the only canon member in official Capcom media. Yo-Yo Man is SWN-008 according to Mega Man Unlimited.

19) Another fun fact: I watched RoahmMythril's blind run when deciding what order to do the robot masters in. He described Rainbow Man's stage with that exact line Sonic's using. Rainbow Man is SWN-007 if you were wondering.

20) In short, they don't have a clue. *Ba-dum-tish*

21) "...heard this Loop! Year! Month! Week! Oh, I give up..."

22) Shippers on deck!

23) She's probably talking about this Loop before the group was properly Awake. Probably.

24) More fun facts: Tank Man (SWN-003)'s line is derived from his quote on his bio image from MegaPhilX's site. I had fun making a point to incorporate a variation of each MMU robot master's bio quote into their dialogue. Tank Man's really stood out though, because, seriously? 865,309 pushups? Was MegaPhilX listening to the song *Jenny* when he wrote that?

25) I like Comet Woman, SWN-009, even if just because there's a decided lack of 'female' robots in the series. Her intro animation is pretty confident and sassy for something rendered in 8-bit graphics.

26) Just in case anyone forgot that Cream was actually a badass, despite being a little girl. Even when not Awake.

27) Little Mac the wallaby... Sometimes I'm just amusing myself really.

28) Silver's not getting out of this Loop with his dignity intact. It's the price you pay for having good friends.

29) Trigger-happy walking engine of destruction in a building full of one of the most volatilely unstable substances known to man? This can only end in fire and death.

30) Hey, someone agrees with me!

31) According to MegaPhilX, Trinitro Man (SWN-006)'s name was originally going to be Nitro Man, but then Mega Man 10 came out and he renamed the robot master to avoid confusion with Capcom's game. Incidentally, he was also going to call Mega Man Unlimited 'Mega Man 10', but decided on a name change for the same reason. Funny story: Someone at Capcom's official newsletter apparently made the mistake before the rename and accidentally used MegaPhilX's artwork as part of the newsletter for the official game.

32) For a giggle, Google MST3K and 'tried to kill me with a forklift'.

33) I was right! *ducks and covers*

34) Like he'd been doing for the last five minutes.

35) Or maybe the second cousin once removed. I always get those mixed up.

36) Just before writing this part was about the first time the group on Spacebattles voiced their realization that 'Bass' wasn't really Bass. If you caught on sooner, give yourself a cookie.

37) Knuckles didn't particularly care that it technically wasn't a knockoff due to the Eiffel Tower not existing in this particular iteration.

38) SWN-005 Glue Man does indeed subvert expectations based on his name. In addition to firing adhesive projectiles, he had wheels on his feet similar to Top Man that he uses to zip back and forth across his arena like a roller skater at a skate park. Complete with doing tricks in the air. Props to MegaPhilX for subverting expectations like that.

39) Song is *Taking Care of Things* from *Phineas and Ferb* . Peace out and rock on.

40) I'm sorry Nega, *what* was your Wisdom score penalty again?

41) Hammer Man was going to be one of the eight robot master bosses in Mega Man Unlimited, but he got demoted to mid-boss status in Nail Man's stage (due to being the dumber of the pair according to backstory). I decided to give him a master weapon and a serial number anyway for purposes of this fic. He's SWN-00A.

42) Speaking of Nail Man, he's SWN-002. And a bit arrogant it seems. He just kind of came out like that.

43) O.O

44) Whirlpool Man is the bonus boss of Mega Man Unlimited, added in an update. He has a copyable weapon and everything, but not a serial number. I decided he would be SWN-00B. He also does kind of look like a cross between Pump Man and Air Man.

45) Oh, and his copied weapon is useless underwater.

46) If you haven't played Sonic RIvals 2, Metal Sonic 3.0 is a recolored copy of Metal Sonic designed by Nega. He skipped 2.0 entirely for some weird reason.

47) And here's SWN-004, Jet Man, to finish up the series.

48) The colors of the Flash Stopper, Bright Man's weapon.

49) Hey, wait a sec, that's not how this fight was scrip–

50) ...

51) ...uh... *sweats* Oh, hey! It's the boss rush! *Tries frantically to salvage the plot*

52) Finally I get to reveal the guy's name! Baroque (along with his design) and his canine Crash were the initial designs that would become Bass and Treble. So when I needed copies of the series anti-heroes, I went with them. If you knew the name earlier than this point, go grab a few cookies. You earned them.

53) Oh, right. Those.

54) If you don't know the name, he's an artist who specialized in paintings of mind-bending geometry.

55) Based off of the appearance of Metal Silver from the Silver the Hedgehog mod of Sonic Generations.

56) And if you think the visual deceptions are bad, think about this for a moment: It's been declared that there's an echoing quality to all sound in this place, plus the annoying recurring *Voooo* sound all over, so that's not exactly reliable either. Assuming anything in the entire zone even had a scent, there's no way to really know what any of the dangerous things smell like from prior experience, so that's a wash. And if you're having to rely on touch to tell you where the death traps are, especially when they can vanish into and appear from thin air, you're in *very big* trouble. Taste? Yeah, right. As unreliable as sight is in this scenario, it may *still* be the most reliable of the five senses.

57) Yoku Man is the secret boss of Mega Man Unlimited. Instead of the letter parts giving you a nifty power-up, this time they unlock a special stage centered entirely around those disappearing/reappearing blocks that continuously pop up in the series. A really annoying special stage, with an equally annoying boss. Yoku Man doesn't even have a proper serial number, it being listed as ?-? in his bio. I took that to mean that, maybe, he wasn't

part of the series itself, instead being an independent agent (despite having Wily's symbol on his door like the rest).

58) Back on Mobius, Sonic felt like someone was stealing his lines.

59) or a small Kaiju if you prefer.

60) Basically, he's using a method known in D&D as counterspelling.

61) I...

62) Because someone asked on the Spacebattles forum if this meant Silver didn't receive Loop memories: He does. But he's the only one who has any about his future. That's part of the problem he's lamenting. Imagine for a moment that only you remember your life before a certain date. Anything about your life prior to that date, no one other than you knows about. Not your friends, family, school, pets, home, anything. There are no landmarks to indicate the existence of anything you remember, nor are there even any official records that any of it was ever there. How sure could you be that it was even real? Come to think of it, this is probably part of what drives most Anchors insane before others in their universe start looping or they meet someone in a fused Loop.

63) I'm not sure what to say, really. I've had Quint's death and its effects on Silver planned since starting Mega Sonic. I'd also planned to end the chapter on something that would lead into the final part of the Loop, Mega Sonic Unleashed, but honestly nothing I had felt right after that last scene. So, see you next time I suppose. It'll have (literally) world-shattering events, epic battles, Rock and Bass under the effects of Dark Gaia energy, Eggman and Wily going head to head, and Duo.

Mega Loops 18

Mega Loops 18

18.1 (GammaTron)

"So we're not going out there...why?" Zero asked as he moved his pawn to take X's rook.

"Just want a break from having to deal with the insanity our baseline causes," X replied.

"Is that why when you woke up a few days after you got sealed up, forced yourself awake, kidnapped me from where I had been hidden away, brought it to a new place with your capsule, and then resumed sleep mode for those years?" Zero asked.

"...Bad Loop, too."

"What was this time?"

"I replaced Leonard Church–the AI, not the scientist–again."

"...Caboose?" Zero asked as X moves his knight, taking Zero's queen.

"Caboose."

Zero nodded, "...So, what did you look like as just an AI?"

"Like myself when I'm a Cyber-Elf," X replied, "Checkmate."

"Dang it! ...Best one million out of two million and one?"

"I was thinking Monopoly."

"No. Not after the last time."

"...We still need to fix that hole in the wall."

"You're the one who made the walls separating us from the outside world impervious to our weapons to make sure I didn't just make an escape out of here this Loop."

"And there's nothing your pocket to fix it?"

"...I have to admit that I did enjoy replacing Washington once and that Sarge was awake," Zero admitted as he pulled out a pile of Bassnium.

"What was the secret ingredient to making Bassnium that time?" X asked, having heard of Sarge's surprising skill from Roll and Rock.

"Surprisingly, used shotgun shells," Zero shrugged as he began to work on the hole.

"Really?" X asked, "Last time I had a Loop with him involving using robots, he made it with the secret ingredient being fruit bat guano."

"...Fruit bat guano?"

"It was a very specific ingredient," X replied, "...Uno?"

"Uno," Zero replied before a hole was made in the ceiling and a familiar scientist to X poked his head in, wearing a hardhat and goggles, "...Finally."

"...Dammit!" X cursed, "Forgot to make the outside drill-proof."

18.!) (Custodator Pacis)

"So, did you like my welcoming party, Mega Man?" The sound of Snake Man, the reptilian robot master, echoed around the boss

room.

"Ha ha, stop pretending already Snake, Dr. Wily never prefers this much explosives and booby traps," Rock deadpanned, "and that ridiculous number of Search Snakes along the way that hid in a cardboard box is a dead giveaway."

Snake Man, or Solid Snake, came out into the light as he point his own arm cannon at Mega Man. Both loopers stared at each other for a while before Rock spoke.

"So, why are you on Wily's side this time?" Rock asked.

"He give me some upgrade that I'm feeling grateful for, enough to put more effort into fighting you here," Snake said. "Don't worry, it's still not enough to risk killing you and getting sent to Eiken."

"What kind of upgrade did he give you?" Rock asked again, raised his eyebrows.

"The ability to smoke," Snake answered as he put one in his mouth and light it up, which left Rock stared at him blankly for a very long time.

"Why do robot masters even need to smoke? No, forget that, how did you even convince Dr. Wily to give you that upgrade?" Rock asked, a bit of annoyance seeped in his words as he slowly put his face into his palm.

"...I think you will either see a lot more Snake Men that can smoke...or never see a single snake motif robot from Wily for a very long time." Snake answered.

"What's the rush?" Blues's Shadow taunted. "You know the only reason you help others with their problems is so you don't have to deal with yours."

Blues stopped and considered that. "True enough," he admitted.

The helmet of Break Man didn't allow facial expression to be observed, but even so Blues got the impression that his Shadow was blinking and working his mouth in astonishment.

"So... what?" his Shadow continued, voice growing dangerous. "You just let it all sit and fester, even though dad's been Awake in... how many Loops with us now? Six? Fourteen? A few dozen? More? Let it churn and grow ever darker, ever more foul and dangerous? What do you think will happen eventually?"

"I'll go mad and my family will have to put me down," Blues returned calmly. "What else *could* happen?"

"And you're okay with that?" the Shadow sounded incredulous. "The pain and anguish you'll heap on those you care for. No matter if you win or lose in a fight, the mere fact that they have to fight you will hurt them. That's the real reason you don't go through with it. You like causing them pain. Deep down, you hate them more than you love them."

"Maybe," Blues allowed. "Maybe not. On the one hand, Rock and Roll are my family. On the other hand they're the ones dad built to replace me. Even if all the evidence points elsewhere, that's how it still feels at times. But you know as well as I do the real reason. Everytime I get it into my head to step up and say something *those* memories come back all over again. The ones I can't forget, can't bury, can't purge, and can't overcome."

"Because you're weak," his Shadow sneered.

"Yes," Blues agreed without hesitation.

His Shadow stared back silently for several seconds. "How the hell did you come to this stalemate? You won't reject me and yet you won't address the part of you that *is* me... How is this possible?"

"Because if facing my own darkness was all I needed," Blues told his Shadow, "I'd have moved past this a long time ago. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have people to help and problems to continue running from."

18.7

"–and so I thought if it worked for the ancient heroes of old, then it could work for you!" Ceil chirped. "Think of it, Zero! Your very own support unit! Heading into battle by your side, aiding you against the forces of Weil!"

Zero simply stared up at Ceil's creation, completely stoic save for a single eye twitch.

"Well, what do you think of him?" Ceil asked with an eager smile.

"You made a *pink elephant* ..." Zero's twitch grew more prominent.

18.M (GammaTron)

"Roll..." Dr. Light began.

"Well, t...they were just so cute and I couldn't help it," Roll blushed before motioning to the smallest of the three beings she brought, "Plus, how can you say 'no' to such a cute widdle face like this?"

"B-Bello..." the Minion shyly greeted, hugging his teddy bear close.

"...They can spend the night," Dr. Light caved.

"Yay!" the three Minions cheered before hugging Dr. Light's legs, "Boss!"

"Just what are these beings, anyway?" Dr. Light pondered, picking up the tallest of the three yellow beings.

"From what I can guess, they're called Minions," Rock noted, the only one of the three Awake, before holding his hand out to the one with an ukulele, "Rock."

"Stuart," the Minion replied, shaking Rock's hand, "Boss's chico?"

"Um...Yes?" Rock replied.

"Hey! Boss's chico ba chica!" Stuart called to the two Minions still hugging Dr. Light's legs.

"Yay!" the two cheered before hugging Rock and Roll.

"See? They're adorable," Roll giggled.

'Tell that to Napoleon, King Ramses, Dracula, a caveman, the Tyrannosaurus Rex, those fish, and those amoeba,' Rock thought, recalling the movie he saw in a Hub Loop about these guys.

18.3 Strikes)

X and Zero were in an important meeting. Namely, deciding what the heck to do about Sigma this Loop.

"As much as I'd love to just drop a nuke on him, there's no way to be sure that it would *work* ," X sighed. "Remember that we had to kill him on the freaking moon in baseline, with him so far from an infectable system that it finally took, before he stopped coming back."

"And Lumine made sure that his legacy would live on *anyway* ," Zero admitted reluctantly. "I know. I was there too. But you can't tell me that blowing Sigma to his constituent atoms wouldn't be satisfying."

"True... Well, if you can figure out how to pull it off without endangering civilians or the environment, then I supp–"

The door to the room opened suddenly, drawing both of their attentions to the hunter that had interrupted them when they'd specifically instructed that there were to be no disturbances.

"I'm sorry commanders," the hunter apologized, "but you really need to come see this..."

Sigma's face took up the entirety of the pirated broadcast, grinning like the maniac he was, talking about how destructive the wars between Mavericks and the Hunters were, and how surely humans and reploids alike could agree that a more peaceful solution was preferable. It was making the synthetic hairs on the back of X's neck stand on end. Even Zero's long ponytail was fluffing out into something closer to a feral lion's mane as he listened to the madman preach 'peace'.

"–and that is why I and my Mavericks are challenging the Hunters to a winner-take-all baseball series."

The camera panned back to show Sigma in an honest-to-Light baseball uniform over his armor; complete with bat, glove, and ball; and flanked by eight Mavericks neither X nor Zero had ever seen before in the Loops, all dressed the same way.

"The losers will surrender unconditionally to the winners," Sigma finished with a smug grin before the technicians paused the feed to listen to their commanders' reactions.

"Trap?" Zero asked in a tone that stated he already knew the answer.

"Most likely," X answered calmly.

"We're going along with it anyway?"

"Oh, yeah."

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Dr. Thomas Light Awoke in a dark room, screwdriver in hand, standing over a prone Rock.

Seconds later, the Loop memories flooded through his mind, and it was all he could do not to retch, as the wave of jealousy, resentment and boiling madness faded.

All of which was aimed directly at Albert Wily, his long-time friend and partner.

As a result of being Awake, Thomas could (or, more accurately, would with the benefit of time) see the distorted mirror his Loop memories were showing, with himself in Albert's place, and Albert in his. And tonight, after the press conference where Albert had demonstrated their new Robot Masters to the world, had been enough for his un-Awake self. Which meant what he had been doing before he woke up...

The thought was just too horrific to contemplate.

After several long moments, Thomas began examining his son, making sure everything was fine. He was heartily glad to see that everything was in fact fine. Quickly, he finished, as he heard Rock's power turning on automatically.

"Wh–" His son began, before turning around. "Okay..."

There was a groan from nearby, followed by a quick "ow" in Roll's unmistakable voice. Seconds later it was followed by a confused "huh", and Roll emerged from the darkness.

"Hi, dad." She groaned. "Rock. Something knocked me out."

"I believe that was me, I'm afraid." Thomas said, sheepishly. "I seem to be in Albert's place, and vice versa. Only instead of reprogramming the Robot Masters, my un-Awake self was planning on reprogramming you two."

"Well, that's disturbing." Roll stated. "Are we playing along?"

The three Lights looked at one another.

"FOOLS!" Dr. Light declared, as everyone present ran from the devastation his twin Robot Masters were unleashing, too terrified to notice how their shots conveniently managed not to harm anyone "Behold the unparalleled might and genius of Doctor Thomas Light!"

"Thomas!" The aghast Albert Wily declared, "Why are you doing this? Why would you turn these two, your own creations, into... into weapons?!"

"Because!" Dr. Light shot Albert as hard a glare as he could muster. "No longer shall my genius be overshadowed by yours! From this day forth, you shall be blinded by my brilliance!"

" *Might wanna rein it in a bit.* " Roll whispered to him. " *Otherwise they might think we're actually serious.* "

"Of course, my trusting servant!" Dr. Light announced. "We hope this has made a suitable demonstration, that from now on, Light Makes Right!"

Rock nudged Doctor Light, who just stared blankly. Rock made a "go on" hand motion.

After a few seconds, Thomas realised what he was trying to signify, and tried out his evil cackle.

He thought it was a pretty good imitation of Albert's.

Roll expressed her opinion by facepalming, as they departed.

A short while later, in their not-at all subtly hidden Light Lair (patent pending), the trio watched on the news as Albert Wily declared his intentions to bring his former friend to justice.

He looked incredibly serious about it. Though it probably helped that this Loop Wily lacked his usual distinctive hairstyle.

"Well, I think that went well." Doctor Light mused, as he took another sip of soothing tea. "Or as well as could be expected. There is one thing that concerns me, though."

"What's that?" Roll asked.

"If I am in Albert's place... and if we presume this Loop follows the same procedure for everyone else... what then of Mikhail and Noelle?"

As if almost on cue, the large communications screen (Rock and Roll had insisted it was necessary) began beeping, a sign of an incoming call. The Lights exchanged confused glances, before turning the screen on.

They were greeted with the sight of Doctor Lalinde herself, grinning in a distressingly different fashion from normal. Were it not for the fact she looked like her in every other respect, none of the three would have said it was her at all.

"Thomas, darling." She said. "Bravo on your little performance today, and on finally deciding to get out from Albert's shadow."

Doctor Light tried to stay in character. "Is there something you wish to say?"

The grin changed. "Well, I was wondering if you might perhaps wish for some... assistance, in your little endeavour."

There was a strangled noise from Doctor Light. "One moment, Noelle." And with that he turned the screen off, and leaned back in his chair.

"Okay..." Rock soon declared. "Maybe we were a bit too convincing."

"How did she even get our number in the first place?" Doctor Light asked. Within an instant, he could practically feel Roll's nervous grin. As he turned to look, she was absently scuffing a boot against the floor.

"I regret nothing." She declared. "After all, I *am* evil."

18.4

"Very well, Zero!" Sage Harpuia declared. "It seems I have no choice but to challenge you to Neo Arcadia's most ancient and honorable form of dueling!"

Zero blinked at the semi-odd turn of events, but decided to roll with it. "Name it! I'll take any challenge you care to dish out!"

"Pie fighting!"

Zero blinked, groaned, and resolved to have *words* with X the next time they were Awake together.

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18. Astro (Dr. Tempo)

Mega Man was practicing his marksmanship, and seemed occupied. Roll walked in, and asked, "What's up, Rock?" Mega Man relaxed, and said, "Remember that Death Battle Loop with Wily and Eggman fighting a while back?" Roll nodded. "Yeah...what a mess that fight

left." Mega Man smirked. "It'll be my turn to fight in one of those Loops soon."

Roll smiled gleefully. "Who're ya facing, Rock?"

"I'm going up against none other than Astro Boy. That'll be a tough fight."

Roll nodded. "Good luck, Rock."

The Blue Bomber nodded back. "I'll need it."

Dr. Nathaniel Cain stood before the Arcadia council on the rather grave matter of Maverick reploids. Reploids who had, in all defiance of their programming, harmed, and in the latest incident killed, humans.

"–and somebody has to answer for this, Dr. Cain," the projected image of the head councilwoman declared. "You introduced reploids to this world. Can you explain what is giving rise to these 'Mavericks'?"

"There have only been three instances so far, Madam Councelor–"

"Three too many!" one of the other council members interrupted Dr. Cain.

"Absolutely too many!" Dr. Cain readily agreed. "But not enough to discern a cause or a pattern!"

"Actually," X interrupted the discussion that would see the rise of the Maverick Hunters as he entered the council chamber proper and strode up to stand beside Dr. Cain to the silent shock of the council and the civilians ringing the massive room, "I have a theory about the matter."

"Indeed?" the head councilwoman recovered first. "Do explain."

"My creator, Dr. Light, made me to possess mental and decision making capacity equal to a human's," X reminded the room of what most already knew quite well. "And then sealed me away for thirty years of ethical testing–"

"Which became a hundred years by mistake," another council member interrupted. "Yes, we're familiar with the tale. What does that have to do with the Maverick problem?"

"Quite possibly everything, honored council," X replied without missing a beat. He now had their undivided attention. "Humans have unprecedented decision making ability among the biological creatures of this planet, but even they are not expected to become law-abiding citizens immediately upon being born. And yet, this is what is being expected of reploids fresh from the factory. They may have been programmed with the basic knowledge of society, laws, basic academia, and subjects relevant to those jobs they are expected to perform, but they have no experience in applying any of them. Especially that which relates to moral judgment."

"And how do you propose to correct this, hmm?"

"Why, using the same time-tested method by which humans are made ready to live and work productively in society," X declared.

The chamber was silent for several long moments as everyone, human and reploid alike, puzzled over the statement.

"And what method would that be, X?" the head councilwoman finally asked.

"Sending them to school of course."

18.8) (Me, NiGHTcapD, KageX, Valentine Meikin, FTKnight, TheZMage)

Axl rounded the corner and found himself face-to-face with a certain set of (slightly immature) Reploids who, for the whole of the Loop, had been riddling him with question after question. Most of the time, it was out of simple curiosity or lack of knowledge of an assigned task, but every once in a while they peppered him with ones that seemed to have been ground fresh off the rumor mill. From the looks on their faces, this was shaping up to be the latter.

On the plus side, this loop was the best one so far to sharpen up his snarking skills.

"Hey, Axl... Is it true what they say about commanders X and Zero? Are they really MST3K enthusiasts who do amateur Riffing?"

"They're not exactly amateurs anymore," Axl stated, thinking about the times the three of them had Looped onto the Sattelite of Love due to Loop crashes. "Well, they still don't get paid, but they're professional-level by now."

"Really? I heard they were using an alias so they could be part of a rock band."

"I'm thinking they have been, once or twice. Light loved that genre." Axl put a hand to his chin thoughtfully. "Definitely before I was built, though. I would have gotten in on that."

"Hey, Axl..."

"Yes?"

"Is it true that X and Zero are really gay lovers?"

"No," Axl deadpanned. "Despite photograph evidence to the contrary, they are not gay. What they *are* is horrible at poker, and they needed to clear a debt."

Another of the group dope-slapped the asker. "Of course they aren't, you silly! They're obviously dating their navigators."

"Idiot!" Axl dope-slapped the junior Hunter instantaneously. "You don't talk about the commanders' love lives! Or lack thereof! Do you *want* to be haunted by the ghost of Iris Cain?"

Smiling sheepishly, a different one piped up. "Are they...Wily Wars Historical Reenactors?"

"Uh, Sigma started it! Every time!"

"Huh. Last one for now, but..."

"Thank Light," Axl uttered under his breath.

"...are they, by any chance, two smaller reploids apiece, one sitting on top of the other and wearing a trenchcoat so that nobody will notice?"

After processing the question and the mental images, Axl checked his loop memories, and suddenly something clicked in place in his mind. "You know, that would explain a lot of things, not the least of which is their weird sense of style."

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18. Quintet

Rock had mixed feelings about Quint most Loops. To start with, the robot was typically built in the future as a copy of Rock himself, and programmed to think he was the future Mega Man reprogrammed to serve Dr. Wily. If he escaped and went back to the future, he had the robotic equivalent of a mental break when he found out that he wasn't Mega Man and started calling himself 'Mega Man Shadow', recruited his own set of robot masters known as the Dimensions and came back to invade the past.

On the other hand, after that mess, Quint tended to come around and became something of an ally. Plus, he wasn't axe crazy like Waltz was after Waking Up (and sometimes was even before).

Regardless, Quint was a tough opponent. Despite the seemingly ridiculous nature of his chosen weapon and support unit Sakugarne, the pogo-jackhammer. After all, he had all the same programmed instincts that had made Rock so effective as Mega Man, but without most of Rock's inhibitions.

As he was being reminded now with the two trading blows back and forth.

"You must know it's hopeless, Mega Man!" Quint snarled behind his blue shades as he took potshots at Rock while intercepting Rock's own with Sakugarne's thicker armor. "I'm you from the future! I have all of your abilities plus forty years worth of upgrades! You can't hope to stand against me!"

"And if you were really me, you'd already know my answer!" Rock shot back, in both senses of the word. Tough or not, Quint's back of tricks never really changed all that much, especially on the psychological front. Deciding he'd played by the usual rules enough, Rock activated the Hard Knuckle. "Besides, if you're really so advanced, where are the rest of your weapons?"

Quint made to dive out of the way, but at the last second stumbled and looked disoriented before being struck full-on in the chest and sent tumbling along the ground.

Rock blinked. That had been odd... But it looked like Quint was down for the count.

He shrugged the matter off as he approached Quint, already prepping himself for whatever exit strategy the robot from the future would try. Quint's green and lime armor suddenly turning blue and a lighter blue like Rock's own was so far down the list of possibilities that the blue bomber froze in confusion.

And got a face full of high pressure water for his efforts.

"Wh–blubbbphhht!?" Rock fought to hold his ground against the spray, only for it to cut off as suddenly as it started. Rock made to move towards a now blue and peach Quint, only to find his feet were stuck to the floor.

"It seems the rest of my weapons are right here, Mega Man," Quint stated calmly as his armor turned wood-tan and steel-gray, and a massive hammer appeared in his hand. Rock reacted quickly and fired another Hard Knuckle even as Quint threw the hammer. The two massive projectiles crossed each other in mid-air and struck their targets. Quint, off-balance from his throw, was blasted backwards with Sakugarne and crashed through a window. Rock, immobile from the glue sticking him to the floor, took the hammer full to the head and blacked out.

Quint came to in a lab that felt like it should have been familiar, but wasn't, and blinked. Running a diagnostic on himself, he soon found that the subroutines that had bound him to Dr. Wily were gone. He felt relieved... and conflicted... and...

And a part of him felt like it hadn't been completely necessary for some reason. But then, that part also seemed to think a dragon had stepped on him, so he paid it no heed.

Regardless, there was only one person he knew of that could have removed Dr. Wily's reprogramming from him.

"Dr. Light?" he called out and sat up, looking around the room. There was Sakugarne, sitting propped up by a table. He felt relieved on seeing his support unit and continued looking around until he spotted the good doctor.

It was odd seeing his creator. For one, the man seemed far less familiar than he should have, but Quint chalked that up to Dr. Wily's handiwork. The bad doctor had done a number on his memories before dragging him to the past. For another, the man was carefully stationed behind a shimmering magnetic barrier eyeing Quint warily.

"Dr. Light? It's me, Mega Man," Quint questioned, unsure of why his creator was so reluctant to come closer. "Don't you recognize your own creation?"

"Oh, I would recognize my son anywhere," Dr. Light returned calmly. "Which is why I know you're not him."

Quint tried to deny it, but found he couldn't compile the necessary words.

"Oh, the workmanship is remarkable," Dr. Light admitted. "The modifications to my boy's plans without peer, even with the advanced hardware I saw. But a craftsman always knows his own work, and a father his own son. As similar as you are, you are not my boy Rock."

"Rock?" Quint puzzled. He knew that name, but... he was modeled after Mega Man. Who was Rock? Was... Had Mega Man... not always been Mega Man? Did that mean that he... wasn't Mega Man after all?

Was he... just a shadow?

"So... I'm just a copy after all..."

"Now that is simply foolishness," Dr. Light scoffed, cutting off Quint's internal pity party. "I have seen copies of my boy, and you are not that, no matter what plans you were made from. As I said, there were modifications made, most to take advantage of technology decades ahead of what most people have now, but also to maximize synergy with your support unit there. Whatever else you are, you are no mere copy."

"I see..." Quint sighed, not entirely convinced, but nonetheless feeling better.

"You are also the best chance I have of getting my son back from Dr. Wily."

Quint blinked, and gave the good doctor his full attention.

Rock hated being reprogrammed. Sure, he had Free Will as a looper, but even that didn't make his programming a non-issue. He often wondered if it was comparable to the instincts that humans and other organics possessed as part of their evolution, and resolved to try and compare the phenomena should the opportunity to do so come up again.

His base programming was so much a part of who he preferred to be that he barely noticed it anymore, but Wily's stuff...

Best case scenario it manifested like some mental itch that took over cognitive processing power insistently until it was scratched. Annoying, but ignorable. It was also fortunately what Dr. Wily had gone along with this particular Loop.

More often, it was like a mantra chanting in his head that wouldn't shut up and got louder if he ignored its commands. Rock despised that version, since ignoring it took up all of his processing power, leaving him vulnerable, and frequently got to the point where the commands *hurt* to keep ignoring.

Then there was his least favorite kind: The one where the reprogramming was like a completely new personality being installed, with Rock's mind partitioned off to where he couldn't influence what his body was doing any more than a backseat passenger could take control of a motor vehicle.

He was personally glad that Wily had gone with the 'itch' version. Because the events of this Loop were something he wanted to play along with for a bit. It was new, it was interesting, and...

Rock looked out from the window of Wily's Skull Station at the red-colored one-man spacecraft with angry eyes and the green-armored passenger, and smiled. He double-checked the trojan he'd slipped

into Wily's security systems, and confirmed that it was ready to shut them off at his command.

This particular rematch was one he was quite looking forward to. It wasn't often that Quint was in the position of the hero. Less often that he was there because he'd caught Rock off guard and delivered him to Wily.

And never because he'd used Master Weapons that he shouldn't have access to.

Yes, Rock was quite looking forward to this...

...perhaps a little too much, he shook his head sharply when he realized the mental itch had abated. Ugh, he hated being reprogrammed.

'Ah, yes, your loyal support unit Sakugarne. I rather approve of it. So much that... I got one for my own.'

Quint sighed as he trudged back into Light Labs. Dr. Wily's Skull station was destroyed, but he couldn't help but feel it was a phyrric victory. Not only had Mega Man escaped capture, he'd left Quint with more questions than ever.

He still didn't know where the eleven master weapons had come from. He had... memory errors telling him about a series made by Dr. Wily; Yo-Yo Man, Rainbow Man, Comet Woman, Tank Man, Trinitro Man, Glue Man, Jet Man, Nail Man, Hammer Man, Whirlpool Man, and the mysterious Yoku Man (was he even one of Wily's?); but they also spoke of a silver-furred humanoid hedgehog and a madman with a torso shaped like an egg. Two of them in fact. Among other things that simply did not exist, so they were clearly faulty.

Quint really didn't know what to think about Mega Man's streak of competitiveness and willingness to stay with Dr. Wily despite apparently having full use of his reasoning. A large part of his mind

was telling him that Mega Man should have been begging for a way to remove Wily's control over him if he still had that much control over himself. Not flee to back up the doctor and help him escape without so much as a mention of his true creator.

And that wasn't even mentioning how the heck Mega Man had gotten his own copy of Sakugarne. One that he seemed at least as comfortabe using as Quint did his. Nor did it explain the suite of master weapons he'd boasted in their one-on-one duel that he'd conspicuously failed to use when paired with Wily, instead limiting himself to those from the doctor's most recent invasion.

So many questions, so few answers that seemed forth–

"Thanks, dad," he heard Mega Man's voice from inside the lab. "Not having Wily's directives distracting me will make the masquerade a whole lot easier to keep up. Especially since–Oh, hey Quint. What's up?"

"You... but... You left with Wily...?" Quint tried to process the sight of Mega Man happily sitting up on an operating table while Dr. Light closed his cranial access ports. "You were swearing revenge and everything?"

"Yeah, sorry about hamming it up so much," Mega Man apologized sheepishly. "Been a while since I had a good excuse to play the role. You did pretty good out there."

"I... but..." Quint tried to wrap his mind around this again and got an error. "Why? Why stay with Wily? ...I assume you're going back after this."

"Curiosity, really," Mega Man admitted. "You make a good hero and I want to see how good. If I 'reform' now, then I'd overshadow you. Plus if I stay with Wily, I can probably keep him from going too overboard by claiming a desire to duel you. Maybe get him to give me command over where and how his armies deploy to minimize collateral damage."

"Again... why?" Quint turned to Dr. Light. "And how are you fine with this?!"

"I'll let Rock explain it," Dr. Light stood and began walking to the door. "In the meantime, I'm going to figure out how to explain all of this, and how much to explain for that matter, to Roll and Auto."

Quint watched the good doctor leave, perplexed, before turning to Mega Man with a gaze that demanded explanation even when hidden behind a pair of shades.

"First off, what do you remember about your past life?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about how you have the master weapons of the Special Wily Numbers when they haven't been built in this reality," Mega Man explained flatly, staring straight back as Quint tried to suppress his shock. "And Yoku Man. He's a weird one to pin down."

"H-how...?"

"Tell me, do you remember Elise? How about... Silver?"

Quint stepped back like he'd been struck. Those were... How could Mega Man know about his memory errors?!

Mega Man's chuckling snapped him out of it and he glared at the blue-armored robot he'd been based off of, his mind running through the most efficient ways of wiping that grin off of Mega Man's face.

"Sorry," Mega Man apologized readily. "It's just not that often that I can knock you that far off balance. I know exactly what's up with your 'memory errors', because they're not errors. They're remnants of a temporal reset that you've experienced. Another timeline you lived that you remember. I know, because it's been happening to me for... a much longer time now."

Quint stared, processing that. It was impossible, but so far the statements seemed to fit.

"Better get comfortable," Mega Man told him, "this could take a while. To start off with, welcome to the Loops..."

18.1) The plot can always find you when it wants to. Always.

18.!) Snake. Why did it have to be Snake?

18.() Blues in Persona.

18.7) Oh Ceil, you and your wacky antics...

18.M) Roll has Minions. Be afraid.

18.3 Strikes) Take me out to *that* ball game!

Sigma's Maverick team (aside from himself) would be based on real life baseball mascots as follows:

Pirate Parrot (Pittsburg Pirates)

Stomper Elephant (Oakland Athletics)

Mariner Moose (Seattle Mariners)

Paws Tiger (Detroit Tigers)

Street Cub (Chicago Cubs)

Waterboat Marlin (Miami Marlins)

Luchador Diamondback (Arizona Diamondbacks)

DJ Ray-mond (Tampa Bay Rays)

Anyone who wants to is free to continue this.

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18.4) Who wants pie?

18. Astro) A very intriguing match-up, given that Mega Man was partly based on Astro Boy in the first place.

18.12) X is not proposing that reploids go to school in the same way or even for the same timeframe as humans. After all, they can download enough information to pass a GED. No, when questioned, he reveals that he's proposing a school for teaching ethics and socialization, much like human children and teens socialize with their peers (with varying degrees of success and myriad results).

Of course, X would be one of the teachers. Cue Professor X jokes.

Yes, I know Dr. Cain has no canon first name. Nathaniel sounded right to me.

18.8) Rumor Mill.

18. Quintet) So many people told me that I needed to start Quint looping after last chapter. This was already written at the time, just so I could hold it back for a few days and watch your reactions. ^_^

Mega Man: Inside Out

Mega Man: Inside Out

AN: When this was first posted on 10/31/2015, it was incomplete. If you only read it then, you missed out on the denouement, commentary, cool bonus content, and epilogue.

Riley blinked as she Awoke in the car again and sighed. She'd been getting used to the repeats, but always Awakening during or right before her family's move to San Francisco (or wherever it was they were moving to this Loop) was getting depressing. She'd really like to have a Loop where she could talk with her old friends in person rather than having to do it over the phone or online.

Speaking of talking with friends, she should probably check in with the ones inside her head.

'Sadness?' she concentrated and used the mental relay system that Phineas and Ferb had installed inside her mind several Loops back.

'How'd you know it was me?' the blue emotion sent back.

'Just a feeling,' Riley thought back with a melancholy smirk. Really, if she paid attention, it was fairly obvious which of her emotions was running the show at any given moment. *'How are the others right now?'*

'Looks like we're all Awake for this Loop,' Sadness sent back. *'Anger's looking over the Mind Reader as usual, Fear and Disgust are talking over first day of school plans, and Joy's rifling through this Loop's memories. She should have a good sample pretty soon and– oh, here she comes now. Sorry. I was kind enjoying our talk.'*

'It's fine Sadness,' Riley thought back, *'I was enjoying it too. Beats staring out a car window at nothing in particular.'*

'Aw, but Sadness loves those times!' Joy joined the conversation. *'I've never seen her more excited than over a good introspective heart-to-heart. Not really my thing, but to each their own, right?'*

'Right,' Riley giggled to herself at the thought of an excited Sadness. The mental image was patently ridiculous.

'Oooo... that's a keeper, Riley,' Joy laughed.

Riley blushed as she remembered that her emotions were privy to such thoughts and promptly imagined a quiet and introverted Joy to even the scales.

'What the...? Is it opposite day and no one told me?' the gruff voice of Anger joined the others. *'Joy, have you shown her this Loop's memories yet or not?'*

'Was just about to!' Joy replied. *'Riley, you remember those video games Dad introduced us to that time you broke your leg on the ice?'*

'Yeah?' Riley thought back as the image of a blue guy running jumping and shooting came to mind. Video games had never been a major interest for her, but she'd needed something to take her mind off the fact that she had a leg in a cast, a pair of crutches, and was supposed to stay off her feet (well, foot and a crutch) as much as possible. Plus her dad had apparently loved the series and his enthusiasm was a bit infectious. And they'd been fun. Frustrating as heck at times, but fun.

'I remember being torn between wanting to throw the controller through a window and wanting to shoot more of those digital things in the face for killing our character all the time,' Anger sounded happy. Which made sense. Aggression in general was his thing. He loved hockey just as much as Riley herself.

'Well, guess where Dad's new job is!' Joy cheered as a new image entered Riley's thoughts. One of a very high-tech lab, at least for the time period Riley was used to, with a great big sign proclaiming it to

be 'Light Labs'. Information came with it, particularly the name of the owner: Dr. Thomas Light.

'Is that Santa Claus in a lab coat?' Disgust joined the conversation. *'I have no idea how he manages it, but he makes it work.'*

'Okay, but what does that have to do with Dad's video games?' Riley thought back.

'He's the guy who made the hero in them!' Joy chirped back.

'No way!' Anger seemed much more interested all of a sudden. Riley was pretty interested now too.

'Wait,' Fear called a halt to the excitement of the moment. *'Didn't the villain if those things work with him?'*

An image of Einstein's evil cousin turning into an alien from outer space came to Riley's mind and she shuddered.

'Oh no!' Sadness cried. *'If Riley has to deal with a mad scientist, it'll be bad!'*

'Bad?!' Fear countered. *'It'll be terrible! We don't know how to fight a robot uprising!'*

'Guys!' Joy called for calm for several moments, *'I checked and there's no mention of the guy in Riley's Loop memories, or anyone else working with Dr. Light right now. And I even think I know why!'*

'You do?' Disgust questioned after a silent moment.

'Yep! You see, his name was Dr. Wily!'

Riley thought that over for a moment, and then realized the strange sense of humor the Loops sometimes had and groaned. The groan was echoed by multiple emotions inside her head.

'The sinister Dr. Wily has been replaced this Loop by the amazing Dr. Riley! Let's see what happens!' (1)

Rock and Roll were loving the current Loop for one very important reason: Dr. Wily didn't exist in it. They were very certain of that. They'd checked every possible digital record regarding every known name variation they'd ever encountered.

The mad scientist didn't exist as a man, a woman, a child, or even an escaped chimp from the zoo that had wandered into a pharmaceutical company (that had been a *strange* Loop).

Of course, it meant that someone else could very well have taken his role and the other shoe was just waiting to drop, but they'd handle that if and when it happened.

"Hey dad!" Roll greeted Dr. Thomas Light as he trudged into the kitchen for breakfast. "How are things going? Awake yet?"

"Still no subspace pocket access," the man smiled as Roll placed an omelet and orange juice in front of him. "So it looks like I'm just a highly lucid Dreamer this Loop."

"Eh, we'll happily store anything you want to keep for a later Loop," Rock offered as he entered the kitchen. "How are preparations for the big presentation going?"

"My new business manager should be starting today," Dr. Light answered. "Though it'll probably just be showing him around and detailing his duties. Still, it'll be good to have more time to work in the lab on many of the projects I've been putting off so Albert didn't try to steal them."

"What's his name again?" Rock wondered. "Bill Anderson?"

"Andersen with an 'e', though the names do sound similar," (2) Dr. Light answered. "Bill and his family have recently moved to Arcadia

for this job, so he probably isn't familiar with the city yet. I'm honestly wondering if I should send Auto to show him the way to the lab or keep Auto at the store so he doesn't scare the man away."

"Probably keep Auto at the store for now," Rock nodded. "He's a little much to take in the first day on the job."

"I wonder if Mr. Andersen has any kids..." Roll mused.

It was early morning after moving day and Riley was reflecting that there were some rather odd and annoying constants in the Loops at times.

'No duh,' she heard Disgust snort in her head. *'Exhibit A: Our house is, once again, a complete and utter disaster area! I mean, the last people who lived here should have had it condemned rather than sell it to poor innocent people like dad and mom!'*

*'Not to mention that the *beep* movers got lost yet AGAIN!'* Anger fumed. *'And will you stop hitting the censor button Fear?!'*

Ding-Dong

'Hey! Someone's at the door!' Joy latched onto this new fact. *'Ooooh! I wonder who it is? I bet it's some of our new neighbors coming to make friends!'*

'I bet it's someone looking for whoever used to live here and now they're going to be reminded that their friends moved away and that'll be sad...'

'Oh geez! You don't think the robot uprising makes house calls, do you?!'

'Settle down you all,' Riley thought to her emotions. *'Let's find out before getting bent out of shape.'*

"Hello, is this the Andersen residence?" Riley heard the voice of a boy about her age ask.

"Um... yes," the surprised tone of her father replied.

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"Red Alert!"

Boy! Boy! Boy!

"How did he find out about Riley so fast?! Why is he here? Who is he?"

"We should probably find out before jumping to conclusions. There is a *tiny* chance the boy is simply a new neighbor being polite."

The Real World

"Who are you?"

"Rock Light, sir," the boy answered in such a polite tone that Riley just knew he'd held his hand out to shake her father's. Peeking around a corner to spy on the doorway, and she saw a young boy with black hair in a blue shirt doing exactly that. "I'm from Light Labs. Dad sent me and my sister over to see how you were settling in, sir."

'Oh, I like this guy,' Disgust mused. *'Polite, charming, decently dressed. Yeah, we could do worse for friends even if he is a boy.'*

"I... see..." Riley's father blinked as he accepted the handshake. "Um..."

"And this is my sister, Roll Light," the boy continued as a blond girl with a ponytail and a red sundress joined him holding what looked like a bag of groceries.

'Wait... Rock... and Roll?' Joy's slow voice sounded in Riley's head. *'Those... are... the... most... awesome... names... EVER! Almost as*

awesome as yours Riley!'

"Oh... my... god..." the girl paused and looked at the interior of the house in horror.

'See! Someone else agrees with me about the house!' Disgust crowed in vindication.

'Oh... she hates our new house... that's sad...'

"Rock, you start making breakfast for these nice people," the girl handed the grocery bag to her brother as well as a frying pan that had been hidden behind it. "I'm going to get my emergency cleaning supplies."

"Bring some of the picnicware while you're at it!" the boy called back after his sister after a glance inside confirming that there was not yet any furniture to speak of.

'Emergency cleaning supplies?!' Fear worried. *'Is she going to scrub our new house from the face of the earth?!'*

'Not like it would be any great loss,' Disgust dismissed Fear's worries.

'But we're still inside! Aren't condemned buildings supposed to be evacuated first?!'

"Um... what just...?" Riley's father finally found his voice.

"Just let my sister work, sir," the boy smiled serenely as he entered the house. "I promise you won't be sorry you did. Now, if you could show me the kitchen, please? I'm not as good at cooking as she is, but I can do a passable omelet."

"Sure..." Riley's dad seemed to latch onto that idea like a drowning man latching onto a life preserver and began leading the boy to the kitchen. After a moment, Riley followed.

'You should introduce yourself Riley!' Joy prompted.

"Hi..." Riley began.

'But don't give away too much!' Fear added. *'We still don't know if either of these two are part of the inevitable robot uprising!'*

"Are you part of the robot uprising?" Riley finished before she could stop herself. (3)

'Oh, nice *one Fear...'* Anger and Disgust both grumbled as Riley's face flushed in embarrassment and her dad barely stifled a snort of amusement.

"Nah," the boy smiled in amusement as he wiped down the electric stove top. "Actually, part of what my sister and I do is help make sure that our dad doesn't engineer one by accident."

"So what else do you do?" Riley's father asked.

"I mostly help dad with his lab work," the boy said as he set out eggs and various omelet fixings. Riley was relieved to note the complete absence of broccoli. "Roll–"

"Ack!" Riley's mom suddenly exclaimed in shock from the entryway. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"And where do you get your cleaning supplies? Because we could really use some around here."

The Real World

"Good morning Mrs. Andersen. My name is Roll Light. And I end messes."

"...does that," Rock finished.

'I don't know about the rest of you,' Disgust broke the silence in Riley's head, *'but I just found* my *new best friend.'*

Roll's claim of ending messes was apparently not made idly. She came in with a commando headband and enough cleaning supplies to be mistaken as a one-maid army ready to take on the apocalypse itself. (4) By the time she was finished, around early afternoon, the still-empty house all but sparkled.

Rock on the other hand had talked to Riley's father about the general expectations and schedule of his new job. Riley had tuned out a fair bit, but the gist was that Rock and Roll's dad, Dr. Light, was gearing up for the release of a major industrial robotics line and was finding that he just didn't have the time anymore to invent, build, and run the business side of things. Which was why Riley's dad had been hired on, with a fairly generous increase in pay over his old job. He'd also talked a fair bit about Arcadia and the various sights, as well as some of the more flamboyant celebrations that the city's eccentric mayor, Leonard Dorado, held. Joy had loved that part in particular and prodded Riley into asking more.

And then the two had offered to take not just Riley's dad to tour his new place of business, but the whole Andersen family.

Riley was excited about going with her dad to see Light Labs. Right up until she saw what she was expected to ride in.

'What in the world is that *?!'* Disgust yelled as Riley beheld the truck the Light twins had arrived in.

'I don't know but I think it's looking *at us...'* Fear added.

'Oh, come on... It's not... that *bad...'* Joy offered, but even she didn't seem really certain.

The truck, if it could really be called that, was bright green and yellow with an open cab. The front of the truck had a face consisting of an

oversized bumper-jaw and two humongous red eye-headlights. (5)

All in all, it evoked the image of some robo-clown and neither Riley nor her emotions were thrilled with the prospect.

"It's... certainly... *unique* ," Riley's mom offered diplomatically.

'Translation: She hates it but doesn't want to be seen as impolite,' Disgust paraphrased.

"Unique is..." Rock began hesitantly.

"... *one* way to describe Auto..." Roll finished. (6)

"Auto?" Riley's dad asked. "And now that I think about it, who drove you anyway?"

"Auto is Light Labs' mechanic and... somewhat eccentric. As for who drove," Rock stated, holding up a license, "I did."

The Andersen family blinked as one.

'I'm torn...' Disgust finally offered from Riley's head. *'The whole driving thing is automatic cool points, but that thing is, like, anti-cool.'*

'He is a very brave soul,' Fear offered.

Riley had absolutely loved seeing Light Labs. The entire place had the general look and feel of something that Phineas and Ferb would want when they grew up. Or at least the chance to play around in over the summer.

The industrial robots, that Dr. Light called the 'robot masters' were six robots that Riley didn't recognize. She chalked that up to only playing the '2' and '3' games of the series that Loop she'd broken her leg (and neither to actual completion), but it still hadn't stopped Fear from ranting about the inevitable robot uprising. Nor had Dr. Light's

explanation of each robot's abilities. Regardless of intended purpose, giant scissors that could cut tree trunks were intimidating.

Then had come Dr. Light talking about the AI of each robot, explaining the concept of IC chips (along with a bunch of technical details that went over all the Andersens' heads) and how each 'robot master' would be able to undertake complex emotional interactions, direct other robots in the workplace, and make complex decisions like a human.

Joy had thought that was awesome, Fear had thought that was terrifying, and before Riley could make peace between the two her father had voiced the concerns.

"This all sounds really amazing, but how do you know these 'robot masters' won't go out of control?"

"For one, I've been testing the cognitive systems and IC chips already and, after... an issue with the prototype... the two finished models are exceeding all expectations for the series, both in emotional interaction with humans and complex cognitive processes."

'But do they have fashion sense?' Disgust snarked.

"Really?" Riley asked. "Can we meet them?"

'Yeah! This is sounding cooler by the second!' Joy agreed.

'Oh... they're the first of their kind?' Sadness realized. *'They must be lonely...'*

"They do sound... interesting..." Riley's mom admitted.

'More like terrifying!' Fear interrupted.

'Will you shut up already!' Anger yelled.

"I'd like to see them myself," Riley's dad folded his arms. "I want to know exactly what you're having me pitch to possible customers."

"Actually..." Dr. Light smiled serenely.

'I swear, he's like my natural enemy...' an unwillingly calm Anger grumbled.

"...I believe you've already met."

'Huh?!' Riley thought in unison with all five of her emotions.

Dr. Light took in the incredulous expressions of the Andersen family and made a sweeping gesture towards his two children.

Rock and Roll waved politely.

'I KNEW IT!' Fear broke Riley's mental silence. *'THE ROBOT UPRISING IS UPON US!'*

"So why pretend that you're not robots?" Riley finally asked.

"Well..." Rock grinned sheepishly.

"It's kind of petty, but we really like seeing the looks on people's faces when they realize that we're not human," Roll explained. "Or whatever the main population is that Loop."

'Oh man!' Joy laughed in Riley's head. *'The look on Fear's face was* priceless *!'*

'Yeah, it was kind of funny how he was running around like a chicken with his head cut off...' Sadness added.

'Uh... gross analogy, Sadness...' Disgust muttered.

"Sorry about how we laughed at your reaction," Rock apologized. (7)

'It was a perfectly legitimate question!' Fear yelled.

'Doesn't mean it wasn't hilarious, Fear,' Joy giggled.

'And a terrible first impression,' Disgust added. *'Way to go, Fear.'*

"Yeah, well," Riley blushed a bit, "saying 'oh, so you *are* part of the robot uprising?' wasn't my finest moment."

"Maybe not," Roll allowed, "but we've had worse reactions."

"Anyway, you're the visiting looper, any plans?"

"Well..." Riley hedged, still not quite wrapping her mind around the two robots in front of her being the local Anchors (each of them was an Anchor apparently, it was a rare thing or something). For one, she'd never heard of a Rock or Roll in either of the games she'd played. Of course, they could have been in the endings, which would make sense as she'd never beaten either of the games. "I kind of wanted to talk to Mega Man... but since I'm replacing that Dr. Wily character... I guess he doesn't get built?"

Rock and Roll blinked at Riley's statement and exchanged wordless glances.

"You... don't know who either of us is?" Roll asked, getting a shaken head from Riley.

"I only played the '2' and '3' games one Loop when I broke my leg in a hockey accident and never actually beat them."

"Huh..." Rock blinked thoughtfully. "In that case... we won't tell you."

'What?!' Anger fumed in Riley's head.

'Oh, come on! That's just low, even for a boy,' Disgust added.

'They gotta tell us about Mega Man!' Joy insisted. *'He's like, the local superhero, right?'*

"Don't get us wrong," Rock hastened to add, "we'll be happy to tell you if you guess, but we don't always get the chance to just 'hang out' with other loopers and be friends before the events that Dr. Wily kicks off become a factor. The last ones were..."

"...Phineas and Ferb actually," Roll supplied after a moment of thought on the matter.

"Oh, circuits, *that* was a wild summer," Rock grinned. "Those two are my favorite mad scientists after dad."

'We are totally asking about that later,' Joy said.

"You've met Phineas and Ferb?" Riley blinked. "They gave me the welcome speech."

"Which musical number did they use?" Rock asked eagerly.

'I got this!' Joy cheered as the memory came up.

"Number... 5," Riley replied.

"Awesome!" Roll grinned. "We actually helped them write that one!"

'Really?!' Joy exclaimed. *'Sweet!'*

'I like her more and more,' Disgust added.

"Huh..." Riley blinked.

"Anyway, what's your Loop like?" Rock asked.

'Wait... they don't know about us either?' Sadness wondered.

'Oop, we're getting memories from long-term!' Fear alerted.

"You... haven't seen the movie?" Riley asked. Aside from Phineas and Ferb, who were often too busy running around with wacky inventions to really take much time for movies or novels in their

eternal summer, most of her fused Loops had been with people who had seen the movie about her baseline. She'd watched it herself a few times, which was still a rather odd experience.

"No offense," Roll assured her, "but we don't always have the time for movies."

"And the popular fare in our Loop tends towards sci-fi anyway," Rock shrugged.

'Yeah, that's so not us,' Disgust allowed.

'Oh, oh!' Joy interrupted before Riley got back on track, *'This calls for an idea!'*

Riley blinked again as a concept she'd been thinking of since Phineas and Ferb introduced her to her own emotions came to the forefront of her mind and grinned. "Actually, I think I know what I want to do this Loop..."

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"I'm not sure I like leaving Riley with those two..."

"Yeah... robots pretending to be human? It doesn't sit well with me..."

"It'll be okay, Anger, Fear," Mrs. Andersen's Sadness reassured her fellow emotions as she called up a memory from short-term to play the interactions with the two... child robots, apparently... earlier that morning. "They seem to be very polite children after all, and the girl was helpful earlier."

"Yeah," Mrs. Andersen's Disgust chimed in with a sigh of contentment as the scene of the young girl cleaning the Andersen family's new house within an inch of its life played. "Ahhh... *There's* at least a week's worth of house cleaning we won't have to be doing..."

"Yeah!" her Joy chimed in. "And Riley seems to like them, so they deserve a decent chance."

"I still don't like it."

"Very well then, check in with the husband. This is his new job after all and we should follow his lead."

"Looks like dear has his 'game face on', Sadness. We can't get a clear reading."

"Then we wait for now."

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"Sir," Mr. Andersen's Fear reported as his fellows; particularly Mr. Andersen's Joy, Sadness, and Disgust; gave the current talk with Dr. Light their attention, "I've been through all of the plans for potential situations and there is nothing about child robots wanting to be friends with Riley."

"Are you certain?" his Anger asked.

"Absolutely," his Fear replied, shuffling through various large binders. "We have scenarios on what to do if there's a robot uprising, a robot apocalypse, a robot dance craze resurgence, robot doppelgangers, robot overlords, robots going haywire (I set that volume aside just in case), robot traffic cops, robot crooks, robot detectives, robots replacing honest working men (set that aside too since it's now relevant), murderous roombas, robot costumes that really want you to wear them, drones flying too close for comfort, and so on, but nothing about robot children." (8)

"Our new boss is wrapping up his speech," the man's Joy spoke up.

"Okay, recap for us."

"He wants us to manage the business side, of course, but it seems his real plan is to use robotics to accelerate the world's cultural and

technological development by removing most, if not all, of the age-old problems plaguing humanity. His end-game is to essentially develop a brand new sapient race of machines to live and work alongside humanity as we go forth to settle other planets, working together to evolve far beyond what either could alone. The current line he wants to market is basically a stepping stone to achieve that."

Mr. Andersen's Anger and Fear blinked owlishly for a few moments.

The Real World

"I must say, Dr. Light," Mr. Andersen said after several long moments to digest what the man had told him, "when you think big, you don't do it halfway."

"Thank you, Mr. Andersen," the scientist smiled.

"Don't thank me yet," Mr. Andersen replied gruffly. "I get that you have good intentions and just want to help people, but I paid attention in my history classes doctor. I know that for every problem someone like you ever solved, at least two more crawled out of the woodwork later on. Some arguably worse than the original problem. Have you even thought about what kinds of problems a plan like yours might create?"

"Actually, I have," Dr. Light replied with a serene smile. "And I find it interesting that you mention history because that is right where I looked when I wanted to know what humanity might face living alongside a new race with potential values and desires that differ greatly from our own. What I discovered was that this would be nothing that humanity has not already faced in some form or another."

Mr. and Mrs. Andersen both blinked.

"It seems fantastic, but take into account the sheer number of different cultures among humanity itself. Do you even know how many there are on this one tiny planet? I don't, even after extensive

research. Barriers of language, values, geography, morality, culture, technology levels, living conditions, sexuality, stereotypes, and more have all conspired to divide us and yet each day those divisions grow just a bit less divisive. We see more and more that those differences make humanity stronger as a whole rather than weaker. So the addition of one more group with differences can only serve to strengthen the whole in the long run, provided we are accepting of them for what they are. Yes, there will always be problems and I suppose a part of me takes comfort in that. For if there were no problems to solve, then I quite fear that I'd find life very empty indeed. Not to mention that I'd be out of a job." (9)

The Andersens exchanged a glance before turning back to him.

"So, what do you say?"

"I say it's a shame you don't run for office because suddenly I'd like to vote for you," Mr. Andersen chuckled. "Alright, doctor. You've got yourself a business manager. Let's see where this crazy road leads."

Rock, Roll, and Riley were gathered around what looked like a red sphere attached to a yellow box with blinking lights. Off to the side was a bundle of cords that looked made to attach to the box.

"Well," Rock mused as he inspected the device, "it could certainly use some maintenance after being in your pocket for so long, but otherwise this Mind Machine is in pretty good condition."

"Oh, good," Riley sighed in relief.

'Yeah, that would be all we needed,' Disgust snarked. *'Having an idea like this and then it being derailed because the thing didn't work anymore.'*

"It wouldn't be that big a deal if it wasn't," Rock tapped his head with a smirk. "We both have all of Phineas and Ferb's usual blueprints in memory. Plus a few things they built just for that Loop."

"Oh, maker, the Phineas and Ferb Numbers were awesome!" Roll giggled.

'We are totally getting that story later,' Joy insisted.

"So, do you think my idea will work?" Riley asked.

"It should," Rock nodded, pulling a large circuit out of nowhere, "especially with these. This is an Integrated Circuit chip. Essentially it's what allows robots like us to have personalities."

"At least the ones not looping," Roll clarified.

"Yeah," Rock nodded. "We're... a bit beyond the usual capacity of the IC chips as a result of looping, but even so these things are so complex that, though they're manufactured the same way, each one will effectively produce a unique evolving personality."

'Wow...' Sadness whispered.

"Again, not taking the particulars of the Loops into account," Roll clarified. "Even though they're supposed to produce unique personalities even when installed in identical machines and loaded with identical programs, the robot masters we know still end up with pretty similar personalities. Usually, anyway."

"Add it to a complex enough CPU and it goes from a basic artificial intelligence to an artificially created intelligence."

'AKA, a recipe for disaster!' Fear added.

"What's the difference?" Riley asked.

"It's the difference between mimicking thought patterns and actually possessing them," Rock said. "Not always easy to define, but very, very real."

"The personality and emotions they enable are so complex that the average robot master variant is essentially a missing link between

having a Soul and not having one. Our Admin says it's part of why we're able to Loop in the first place." (10)

"So...?"

"So," Rock grinned, "we should be able to essentially make a new Mind Machine that can download these additional loopers who live in your head to an IC chip, which we can then put in a robot body of their very own."

"You'll be touring Arcadia together in no time," Roll smiled.

'I love this plan!' Joy cheered.

'Yeah,' Sadness added quietly, *'we can take long walks in the rain and obsess over the weight of life's problems together...'*

'And hugs! Don't forget hugs!'

'Guys, I really think we should take a closer look at this idea before we go through with it...' Fear worried. *'I mean... something's bound to go wrong.'* (11)

'Oh, don't be such a spoilsport,' Disgust scoffed. *'Riley, you better be ready for one heck of a shopping spree because I intend to leave you looking fabulous.'*

'Heh...' Anger chuckled, *'don't forget to leave some time for a little one-on-one on the ice!'*

'Guys!' Fear insisted.

'Oh, lighten up, Fear!' Joy chastised.

'Yeah, think of being able to see a scary movie with Riley,' Sadness prodded. *'I mean, you'll probably embarrass yourself screaming, but that's okay, right?'*

'Okay... yes, I'd like that; not the being embarrassed part, the other one; but still...!'

'Fear, do you have one solid reason why we shouldn't do this?' Anger sighed heavily.

'No! I don't! I can't think of a single one! Or find one in my disaster planners! And that should worry you!'

'Oh, give it a rest Fear,' Disgust scoffed. *'I say we go through with it.'*

'Yay!'

"It's settled then!" Riley smiled at her new friends.

"What is that you're installing?" Riley asked Rock as the latter fiddled with the generic robot bodies her emotions would inhabit. The technical specs went way over her head, but the gist was that on download, the bodies would be reconfigured to something more closely resembling the personality on the IC chip. Rock and Roll had mentioned something about 'Color Masters', but Riley hadn't asked for clarification. The last time she had, it had resulted in a technospeak lecture that had left her eyes crossed.

Come to think of it, she might regret asking her latest question...

"I call it the Zen Buster," Rock told her. "It's an energy blaster I developed that calms the target's emotional state. Completely harmless and nonlethal, but it could come in handy if by some misfortune there ends up being trouble. I developed it after..." (12)

'Joy, don't fall asleep now!' Fear yelped in Riley's head.

Riley tuned out, smiling and nodding politely as Rock went on about something called 'broforce'.

Joy smiled as she looked out at the Islands of Personality that made up Riley visible from headquarters.

Proud and center was the improved Family Island, powered by a core memory formed from Joy and Sadness, three times as large as almost any of the others, and also supported by Riley's pre-Awake yellow core memory. Also at the back were the reformed versions of the other four personality islands that Riley had possessed prior to that disastrous baseline incident. Hockey Island, reformed in the baseline by a core memory from Joy and Anger; Honesty Island, reformed by a core memory from Joy and Fear; Friendship Island, another Joy and Anger one; and Goofball Island, the only one of the original five that was still pure Joy (if smaller than the others for that fact). Next to Goofball Island was a similarly small island, formed from a purely Sad core memory, its imagery morose and lonely, calling out for a hug. The core memory Sadness had formed that Joy had prevented from reaching the chamber originally.

Then there were the other Islands Riley had formed after the baseline incident in the year following while reforming the original five. There was School Island, formed from a core memory by Sadness and Anger after Riley spent a week on a particular science project only to have it completely ruined by an accident; Vampire Romance Island, that Sadness was rather fond of despite being formed from a core memory of Disgust and Fear when reading a book that Riley had found utterly creepy and disturbing yet could not put down (13); Fashion Island, powered by a core memory of Joy and Disgust that had formed on a shopping trip when some of Riley's friends tried to get her to try on the most ridiculous outfit for laughs; and Communication Island.

"Heh..." Joy chuckled at that one, with its cell phone imagery. "Insert young girl with her phone joke here, folks."

The Loops had formed a few interesting ones as well. Perhaps foremost was Concert Island, formerly Boy Band Island, the original core memory joined by one from a Loop where Riley had learned to play the guitar and had found she was pretty good at it. There were

several others that were new in the Loops, not all clearly visible from the windows of Headquarters. One that was clearly visible was Zombie Island, formed by Fear and Anger (much to both of their dismay) during a Loop they'd been the only two of Riley's emotions Awake during a zombie apocalypse. The island featured a large statue representation of Riley holding a hockey stick that Joy thought held a rather brave and heroic pose as it faced off against an oncoming tide of undead.

But the one that was the most impressive was Unity Island, located directly below Headquarters and thus only partially visible from the windows, and extending out to engulf the connections tethering the other islands to Headquarters in a way that turned them from precarious walkways only meant to channel power to and from Headquarters into proper bridges, with railings and everything. The island had been formed during a group hug between all five emotions and Riley herself the first time they met face-to-face. A feat made possible thanks to the genius brothers Phineas and Ferb and their miraculous Mind Machine. The brothers had not only brought Riley inside her head (an action only necessary because all five of her emotions had come to blows over the confusion of the Loops, and unwittingly thrown Riley's mind into chaos as a result), but they'd helpfully explained the Loops, taught them all the art of subspace pockets and pings, and even upgraded their console to allow direct telepathic communication between Riley and her emotions without Riley needing to enter her own mind again. An upgrade that looped with them (or at least Riley) even!

And now... Now they were going to actually attempt the feat in reverse. The emotions leaving Riley's head to join her outside.

It was going to be the best day ever!

What could possibly go wrong? (14)

"Everything set?" Roll asked her brother.

"Five bodies, three female standard, two male standard, ready and waiting. With a few spares just in case," Rock replied as he looked over the alcoves housing the prepared bodies.

"Check!" Riley noted.

"New mind machine showing all systems green."

"Check!"

"Remote override in place and operational?"

"Check!" Riley confirmed as she adjusted the failsafe headband the Light twins had developed for her.

"Five sapient emotional entities ready and waiting...?"

'Ready!'

'Waiting...'

'Let's get this show on the road already!'

'I still think this is a back idea!'

'Oh, put a sock in it already!'

"Check, check, check, check, and check!" Riley smiled, strapping herself into the main chair while Roll adjusted the headgear.

"One young lady hooked up and ready to rock and roll?" Rock grinned.

"You know it!" Riley grinned back.

"Then, let's get started!"

The five emotions in Riley's head stared up at the repurposed memory recall tube, which in short order would put its new functionality to use by moving them to new bodies of their own with which they would be able to interact with their mutual favorite person in the multiverse.

"I still have a really bad feeling about this!" Fear shuffled nervously.

"It'll be fine, Fear," Riley's voice sounded from the control panel. "I mean, you haven't found anything wrong with the plan, right?"

"Not a thing!" Joy chirped for her fellow emotion.

"And not for lack of trying either," Anger grumbled. Searching through Fear's planners for something on this scenario had not left him in the best of moods the first time the emotion had grabbed him for the job. Nor had the subsequent attempts.

"Anger, be nice," Sadness scolded half-heartedly.

"DO *ANY* OF YOU REALIZE JUST WHAT IT MEANS THAT *I* CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHAT COULD GO WRONG?!" Fear shouted.

"Not really," Disgust rolled her eyes as the memory recall tube began powering up and smirked as a thought occurred to her.

"I SHOULD BE ABLE TO FIND SOMETHING WRONG WITH ANY–" Fear was cut off as Disgust gave him an unceremonious push towards the recall tube and he was whisked away.

"What?" Disgust asked when the other emotions stared at her. "I just did what we were all thinking."

If he had a mouth, he would have smiled. It had taken a great deal of patience and hacking to arrange the opportunity he was about to have, from arranging the current fused Loop to ensuring that both that fool Hephaestus and that idiot Janus were out of their offices for

reasons that would not have them interfering any time soon to subtly steering the thoughts of all involved away from the very obvious consequences of their endeavor. But it was about to pay off big time. And with a personal touch, he would get both revenge on the ones that had humiliated him before as well as a follower all his own. Perhaps the first of many.

Everything was going his way this time. He could almost taste his triumph already. For once, he lamented his lack of a mouth, because this was a prime opportunity to laugh.

Rock and Roll watched as the first of the male robots reconfigured itself into a tall skinny form with a purple color theme, and then proceeded to freak out.

"AAAHHHHHH!" 'Fear Man' screamed as he looked around the room. "I wasn't ready yet! What if there were alligators out here! Or jumpropes!"

"There are no alligators in the lab, moron," a green-armored 'Disgust Woman' scoffed as she finished the transition.

"And we haven't had weaponized jumpropes around here for a few dozen Loops now," Roll added. (15)

"Wait, that's a thing?" the short, squarish, and crimson 'Anger Man' asked in confusion as he stepped out of the alcove.

"It's not even the most ridiculous one we've had," Rock nodded as 'Sadness Woman' began her transformation. "Dr. Wily's a *mad* scientist after all. How are you feeling, Riley?"

"Pumped!" Riley grinned like a kid on a sugar rush. "I can't wait to finish this!"

"No anxiety?" 'Fear Man' asked? "Trepidation? Discomfort? Annoyance that it's not yet over?"

"None at all!" Riley grinned, not noticing the dawning looks of horror on her emotions faces as the final download commenced. "In fact I– oh..."

"Oh what?" Roll asked in alarm even as 'Joy Woman' began to take form.

"With us out here..." 'Anger Man' began.

"The party is getting started!" 'Joy Woman' declared.

"No, Joy," 'Disgust Woman' trembled. "With us out here, Riley can't *feel* ..."

'Joy Woman's' happy expression froze and slowly melted into a look of horrified realization. "We have to get back in there," she declared.

"No worries," Rock told them hastily. "All we need to do is hook you back up so we can reverse the process. We'll have this sorted out in a few–"

"Who...?" Riley began speaking in a monotone, like she was certain she was supposed to be terrified, but couldn't pull it off.

Ah, it was so good to be inside such a user-friendly mind for once. Especially with all the troublesome distractions and resistance so thoroughly removed. Arranging a mindscape avatar was generally tricky even for the best of divine operators, but mental purviews were something of a specialty of his.

"Who... who are you?" the emotionless monotone voice of the mind's owner called out, somehow sensing his presence. Somehow able to sense that his presence was wrong, even absent her emotions. "What are you doing here?"

He couldn't speak, of course, but he sent out the mental impressions he had perfected in place of such a crude communication method.

As he walked over to a bin of lightbulbs, and what a droll way to represent ideas that was, he gave her a sense that everything would be fine.

There... There was the idea he knew would be here. The idea that couldn't help but form, especially in a branch like this one. After all, ideas did not form with discrimination about which were bad and which were good. Only their execution cared about that distinction. And with those troublesome emotions gone, there was nothing to stand in the way of this idea.

"You're not supposed to be in here..."

As he walked over to the console and found the place to put ideas, unceremoniously extracting and discarding the one already there, he sent the impression that such details as him not belonging no longer mattered. He was here now and all she had to do was follow his lead, stop resisting, not cause trouble, and give in to the madness.

He inserted the idea forcefully and twisted it in such a way that accepting it would be simple reflex.

"THIS IS THE WORST POSSIBLE DISASTER EVER!" 'Fear Man' screamed as he ran in circles. It was perhaps a testament to the others' agreement that they didn't try to calm him down.

"Hurry!" 'Joy Woman' urged. "If someone's poking around Riley's headquarters while we're not there..."

"We're working as fast as we can," Rock and Roll assured them.

"Who the hell could even get in there and how?!" 'Anger Man' demanded.

"We should have listened to Fear..." 'Sadness Woman' sighed.

"Yeah, we shoul–" 'Disgust Woman' cut off suddenly.

"Guy–?" Roll began to turn around, and caught a bolt of green energy to the chest that blossomed like a massive flower before collapsing in on itself, leaving Roll to drop to her knees and wrap her arms around herself protectively.

"Roll?!" Rock turned to check on his sister, mentally wondering why the energy burst hadn't affected him when a sunshine yellow bolt of energy slammed into him and flared like a flash grenade.

"Oh maker, this is all our fault," Roll muttered to herself, shaking and rocking in place with a self-reproaching grimace twisting her features. "We should have never suggested this. It's all our fault. All our fault."

"Hahahahahahahahahaha!" Rock rolled on the ground, laughing up a storm at a joke only he seemed to get.

"Riley?" 'Joy Woman' asked with a pained smile, her buster arm still pointed at Rock. "Why did you make us do that?"

"That was a very mean thing to do, Riley!" 'Sadness Woman' admonished, staring wide-eyed at the girl still in the chair for the new mind machine. "You should feel ashamed of yourself."

"I should..." Riley agreed listlessly. "But I don't..."

"Riley, stop this right now!" 'Anger Man' demanded, beginning to move in the girl's direction, but finding that his body refused to act against her.

"The override..." 'Fear Man' realized, having gone so far into sheer terror that he was now experiencing a strange sense of calm.

"Yes..." Riley confirmed. "You can take no action I do not command, my Emotion Masters... Now go. Conquer the world in the name of Dr. Riley..."

"Riley!" 'Disgust Woman' yelled back even as the five marched unwillingly towards the exit. "This is a terrible idea!"

"I know..." Riley intoned as the five exited the room, leaving the self-reproaching Roll and the laughing Rock behind. "But I can't seem to stop myself..."

Of course she couldn't stop herself. In the absence of her emotions, she belonged to whomever took command of her ability to feel. In this case, him.

"Why...?" the girl asked again.

Because he could. Because she was his perfect vessel now without those troublesome emotions. And besides, wasn't it so much better without such conflicting views muddling her thoughts? Besides, it was considered polite to help others, and he was so very much in need of her help.

"I don't want to hurt people..."

Oh, but she did. Everyone wanted to hurt others. Some simply hid it better than the rest. Wasn't it so much better now that she didn't have those sweet little lies of polite society holding her back?

"No..."

She really needed to stop lying to herself like that. He knew what was best for her after all. She should trust him. He knew how to get what she really wanted. Because what she wanted was what he wanted.

And the Slenderman got what he wanted. (16)

Riley's emotions were breaking down fast in the current crisis. Riley had, for whatever inexplicable reason, decided to send them to

conquer the world. And because she had the emergency override for their systems, they weren't able to do much to stop themselves.

Sadness was weeping up a storm already, Disgust was muttering a never-ending string of insults at the group in general and herself in particular, Anger was so livid that the override was the only thing keeping him from rampaging out of control, Joy had the most fake and pained grin embedded in her face that had ever been seen, and Fear...

Actually, Fear was rather comfortably in his element. Maybe it was just from panicking so much over not being able to think up the problems with this idea before, which had turned out totally justified, or maybe he'd somehow found some sort of zen zone by complete accident. In any case, he was furiously cataloging everything he could and coming up with possible reactions beyond screaming in terror. He was already doing that internally, so there was no need to be redundant.

Riley was having them secure Light Labs. Check. They were to begin automated production on more generic models for... reasons. Check, and disturbing in implications. They were then to head out to the city and cause as much of a panic as possible. Check, and definitely something to try and head off if possible. Too bad he couldn't see how just yet. They apparently had weapons that could induce pure emotional states in their targets. It didn't matter that they didn't seem to deal damage, starting a riot would be small potatoes for them at this point.

"Oh my god!" Fear exclaimed. "I just realized!"

"What?" Sadness sniffed morosely as they all continued on their way.

" *We're* the robot uprising! Oh, this is bad, this is very bad!"

"What in the world?" a new voice cut in, giving Fear a sinking feeling as he turned to look. Yep, there was Doc Light at the end of the hall.

With Riley's parents.

'WORST! CASE! SCENARIO!'

"Riley... no..." Joy strained as the overriding command to neutralize all opposition caused them all to raise their weapons at the three. "That's mom and dad! You can't!"

"What's...?" Mrs. Andersen wondered wide-eyed as she took in the sight.

"Please!" Joy pleaded.

"Don't make me do this..."

Oh, but she had to. It was all or nothing.

"I shouldn't hurt them..."

They were already hurt, one way or another. Either they became casualties like everyone else, or they watched the unfeeling monster she became. Which was the more merciful option?

"I can't..."

She could. It wasn't like she could feel bad about it, anyway. They were just two more people in her way in the end.

"I won't... Not them..."

Perhaps not now. But in time. There was no stopping things after all.

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"That..." Mrs. Andersen's Joy spoke up after an extended period of stunned silence. "That was another Joy... wasn't it? On the outside?"

"I... think she was crying..." Mrs. Andersen's Sadness had trouble taking her eyes off the visual display, as if the current scenery of hurried retreat (being directed by Mrs. Andersen's Fear, who was the only one even barely functional) would offer insight into the supposedly impossible phenomenon that had been witnessed.

"I... I think they might have been Riley's emotions..." the woman's Disgust offered, having noted the presence of the other four.

"What are they doing *outside* though?" her Anger wondered, the very concept rendering her incapable of her usual forms of expression.

The Real World

"Doctor, what–" Mr. Andersen tried to ask as the man hurried him and his shell-shocked wife away from the strangely colored robots. The ones that had supposedly been begging Riley not to hurt them.

"No time," Dr. Light hurried them through the lab's halls away from the other robots, though not towards the exit. "We have to find our children and get them out of here!"

The Andersens exchanged a look and picked up the pace as Dr. Light led the way to the lab that their children had taken over for some personal project or other. Fortunately, no one stopped them on the way, but the sight when they arrived caused all three to come up short.

Dr. Light's creations were rocking back and forth on the ground, Roll muttering a string of self-depreciations while Rock shook with uncontrollable laughter. Nearby, strapped into a seat, staring blankly straight ahead, was Riley.

"Riley!" Mrs. Andersen cried out and rushed for her daughter, followed closely by her husband. They didn't know what was wrong, or why, and they didn't care just yet. Their only concern was the safety of their dau–

Bzzzvvvmmm

Mrs. Andersen collided with an energy field a few feet from Riley and fell backwards like she'd run into a wall, into her husband who barely managed to keep them both standing.

"You shouldn't be here..." Riley muttered in a tone that sounded half dead from sheer lack of emotion. "You shouldn't see this..."

"Riley!" Mrs. Andersen yelled, pounding on the energy field, the otherwise invisible force lighting up at each point of impact. "Riley!"

"Rock! Roll! What happened?"

"Em-m-motional Pro-ha-ha-ha-cessing-ee-hee Overloa-ha-ha-ha-ha-d! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Rock managed to wheeze out between laughs.

"We should have known it would go wrong," Roll added in disgust. "We're such failures."

"Riley! You need to let us through! We can help!" Mr. Andersen yelled past the forcefield keeping him from his daughter.

"I can't..." Riley replied listlessly. "It's the rules... Dr. Riley has to take over the world..."

"No you don't, little monkey!" Mr. Andersen insisted.

"Riley, what's gotten into you?" Mrs. Andersen cried.

"He did... After the others got out of me..."

A sudden chill ran through everyone, so pervasive that the concerned Andersens took a step back from their daughter and the robot duo's emotional breakdowns grew silent in response.

Five pairs of eyes were drawn to a holographic display floating above Riley.

"I... don't recall hooking that up..." Rock ground out as he finally started getting his systems back under control.

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"Is..." the woman's Fear stared at what Mrs. Andersen was seeing. "Is that... a Headquarters?"

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"Are we *actually* seeing another Headquarters?" Mr. Andersen's Fear finished.

"More than that," the man's Sadness added. "I think it's *Riley's* ..."

The Real World

"What's...?" Mrs. Andersen began before a face so pale it was sheet-white filled the screen.

Or rather, the distinct lack of a face where there should have been one.

" *You* ..." Dr. Light whispered in a combination of stark fear, primal anger, and utter loathing.

A sense of dark amusement, the kind found in people who liked to torture small animals for fun, washed over them, as well as a sense of recognition. Whoever, or whatever, this faceless individual was, they were unconcerned with the doctor's ire. And why shouldn't they be? They had already won. Riley was theirs now, fully under their power and beyond anyone's ability to save.

"Stop..." Roll ground out.

No, he would not stop. Not until the world was Riley's, and Riley was his. It had already begun, and there was nothing any of them could do about it. Riley only listened to him now. What he wanted became what she wanted.

"Stop listening to him..."

"What?" Mrs. Andersen shook off the paralyzing foreboding that she'd been feeling at the words. Seeing her do so prompted her husband to do the same.

The pathetic little robots didn't know what they were talking about. How could they? It wasn't like they were human after all. Not like their monster of a daughter who was going to conquer the world and wreak untold havoc on–

"Those thoughts you're getting..." Rock huffed with effort. "That's how he communicates..."

They were supremely annoying little robots. But it was no matter. The lab was already under Riley's control, and by extension, his. Soon enough, none of them would be any problem whatsoever.

"Dr. Light..." Mr. Andersen shook his head furiously as if that would rid himself of the sinister thoughts invading his mind. As he did, he clutched his wife firmly on the shoulder, though he was uncertain if it was for her benefit or his own. "What is...?"

"I'll explain later," the good doctor replied with effort as he helped his children to their feet. "Right now, we need to get out of the lab."

"But Riley–"

"You can't help me if you're all dead..." Riley stated in an emotionless monotone.

...Fine. They could run like the scared little mice they were, but it would make no difference. There was no saving Riley anymore. There would be no saving themselves either. Why, by the end of the day there would be no saving anyone. (17)

"Doctor, what was that... that... *thing* ?" Mr. Andersen finally asked when the five of them had gotten back to the Andersen household. His mind was a whirl and his emotional state was more unsteady than a land dweller after riding a rollercoaster and stepping onto the deck of a ship in the middle of a storm. (18)

"He is called the Slenderman," Dr. Light informed the Andersens as he went to check on Rock and Roll, only to be waved off.

"We're fine, dad, really," Rock assured the man with a weak grin. "Finish telling them."

"Very well," Dr. Light sighed before turning back to the worried Andersens, Jill having to lean on her husband for support. "The Slenderman is a memetic lifeform, a sapient being manifested from pure thought, and perhaps the most sinister and vile to have ever existed."

"A... a what?" Jill asked in confusion. "And how did he get ahold of our daughter?!"

"Our fault," Roll sighed heavily. "Rock and I didn't take possible intruders into account when we helped Riley develop a way for her emotions to come outside her head and spend time with her."

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"...A-buh?"

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"I... what?"

"They can... do that?"

"Oh god... that thing *was* in Riley's headquarters!"

The Real World

"I think he might have been steering our thoughts away from the problems with the plan, like Riley's emotionless state once her emotions were outside her head," Rock theorized, "but I can't prove it. In any case, we were expecting possible problems with the emotions going out of control with their own bodies and gave Riley the ability to override their controls. And now..."

"How do you fight a... 'memetic lifeform'?" Mrs. Andersen asked finally.

"With belief," Roll answered. "They gain strength through belief, but they can also be weakened by it. You just have to believe that they can be beaten more than you believe they can't. It's... sometimes harder than it sounds."

"How... how do we save Riley?"

"First, we have to get her emotions back," Rock replied as he fiddled with the television remote, intending to find the news on any developments. He didn't have long to wait.

"–where an attack by unknown machines has started a massive riot," the voice of BNC's news anchor Chest spoke up from the emergency broadcast the moment the television came on. "We not go live to Reporter Ripot, already on the scene."

"Thank you Chest," the green reporter bot with helicopter blades jutting from his back said as behind him a crowd of angry people were tearing apart storefronts and fighting each other viciously in the streets with no rhyme or reason. Men, women, rich, poor, old, young,

all kinds of people were tearing apart the street and each other in a blind rage. "As you can see, the riot behind me broke out after a short squat red robot fired an unknown weapon into the streets and in moments the scene became what you see here. The police have been dispatched, but I'm told that a tall, thin purple robot intercepted them and all units have fled. As things stand, there is no telling when the violence will subside and–"

A roll of thunder was picked up by the camera, and moments later a rain of shining blue washed over Ripot.

"–it's just the most heartbreaking thing ever!" the robot wailed pitifully, tears of lubricant seeping out of his optics as the reporter curled up into a fetal ball and sobbed on live television. From the way the camera managed to maintain a partial view of him, and the sound of more sobbing, it seemed the cameraman had succumbed to the same fate.

"Uh..." Chest looked disturbed as the news feed cut back to him. "W-we're told that Mayor Dorado has called for the support of the armed forces to contain this disaster, but there is as-yet no confirmed response. Citizens of Arcadia are advised to remain indoors and–"

"We have to get out there now," Rock lowered the television volume so he could be better heard.

"What?!" Dr. Light objected. "But your current systems aren't designed for–"

"We don't have time for you to upgrade us, dad," Rock reminded the man. "We have to get their IC chips back, *intact* , before something happens to them. As it stands, the military might either fail and become part of the riot being started, or they'll succeed..."

"...and possibly destroy one or more of Riley's emotions 'forever'," Roll finished, deciding not to state the likely possibility that any emotion lost would be restored for Riley's next Loop. That wouldn't

serve to reassure her parents this Loop, nor would it fix whatever Riley suffered due to a Loop with an incomplete emotional state.

"We'll figure it out, dad," Rock smiled. "We both have the Variable Tool System and the Copy Chips installed. We can subdue them and get their IC chips without damaging them in any way." He intentionally left out that their current versions were much less versatile than the weaponized Variable Weapon System and Copy Chip combo, rendering almost all of their looping Master Weapon Libraries unusable, but they would just have to do. They would have to face this crisis without the benefit of being Mega Man or Mega Woman.

"You... You can save our daughter?"

"Of course," Roll nodded. "Just have faith in us."

The Slenderman would have smiled sinisterly at the cowering mind workers before him were he able. But he wasn't, so he settled for looming menacingly and wordlessly conveying that they'd better have what he'd requested.

Gulping, the mind workers motioned to the rest who'd come along on the Train of Thought and they started bringing in various figures and knicknacks.

"I would die for Riley!" a painfully stereotypical brooding pretty-boy declared as he was shoved in. Followed by a couple more identical to the first, some cloud people, a rainbow-maned unicorn, several odds and ends from the depths of the girl's mind, and a pink... something or other.

He wasted no time and pointed imperiously to the space under the tube that the girl's emotions had left by.

"What if we don't wanna?" one of the things piped up.

Slenderman sent out a very detailed impression of what would happen then, getting a satisfying terrified squeak from the speaker.

"I live for Riley, and I would die for Riley," a chorus replied from the 'boyfriends'. A more pathetic and boring bunch of joes he'd never experienced, he'd wager.

Slenderman informed them that, if they really wanted to help Riley, they would stop being stubborn. The girl was resisting him, and that would only cause her pain in the long run. If she was to be free of pain, she needed to be free of things that caused her pain. Which was all of them. She would be much more sedate, and safe, with her mind emptied of all... distractions...

'Sadness Woman' gazed down at the poor reporters she'd just reduced to tears with her 'Sad Raincloud' weapon. They should have been helping tell people what was wrong with the city and what they should do to stop it, not bawling like helpless children.

'I shouldn't have done that...' she thought despondently. *'They were just doing their job and I...'*

She sniffed and let the synthetic tears of her current mechanical body flow freely down her face. It wasn't like anyone could tell with the rain her weapon made. Just another way in which she'd failed today.

'Failing is a part of life...'

Disgust, or 'Disgust Woman' she supposed, despised everything about the situation. She despised her lack of control over what she was doing, she despised how incredibly easy it was for her to turn people against each other–

"Get that gross thing away from me!" a young woman backhanded a small black box out of the hands of a kneeling young man, whose

hopeful expression turned confused and hurt as the woman vented the emotions that 'Disgust Woman's' 'Blooming Disgust' weapon had invoked in her, and every other female in its radius, leaving the unaffected males to fruitlessly try and placate them. A short ways away on a playground, a similar scene played out except with only parents affected, leaving the children to wonder just what they'd done wrong.

–and she really despised how much Fear had been right about... everything.

She grimaced as the order came in to fire on another group. Another order she'd love to refuse, but couldn't. She had to obey it. Her body would move whether she resisted or not.

"Fine... Maybe I have to do this, but I'm doing it under protest..."

'Fear Man' trembled as he stalked around a corner, terrified that someone was going to realize what he'd done to the police with his 'Frantic Fright' weapon and arrest him for it. They'd lock him up and throw away the key! Or deport him! Or deport him and lock him up where he'd been deported to! Then he'd never be able to help Riley fix this!

"Deep breath... Focus... Remember what's important..." he told himself as his body continued moving according to Riley's unfathomable directions. He wanted to know why she was doing this... Who was directing her in the absence of her emotions... What it was all about...

He'd been steadily getting less rational as things went on. He was Fear. Thinking up ways things could go wrong was his job. A job he'd failed at spectacularly. Because it wasn't just thinking about how they could go wrong, it was also coming up with ways to make wrong things go less wrong. To anticipate disasters and stop the damage they did. Or at least figure out how to end them before it got too bad.

Well, he'd failed to see this coming, despite the fact that it should have been obvious. Riley without emotions? Of course she'd be emotionless! Of course she'd be ripe for whatever decided to take advantage of her vulnerable state! Of course the whole thing was the worst idea in the history of worst ideas!

And the worstest of all worst parts was that he couldn't figure out a way to stop it! He and the others were every bit as helpless as Riley was right now! Where was Mega Man now?! Or a Mega Woman if it was that kind of Loop?! Where was the hero who stopped robot uprisings?!

Oh, that was right, he *didn't exist because Riley had replaced the villain and taken over the lab where the hero was built!*

Anger was furious at everything. He was furious with those two kids who'd built the machine that had extracted all of Riley's emotions like this, he was furious with the orders that had sent him out into the city to cause a riot, he was furious with the people who didn't know enough to get the hell out of his way before he turned them into raging berserkers with his 'Angry Flame' weapon, he was especially furious with the fact that his weapon *went through walls* and affected people indoors, and he was especially furious at himself for not being strong enough to stop any of it.

"WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE THIS?!"

Joy wanted nothing more in the world right then than to be able to stop smiling. Barring that, she'd accept no longer having the ability to force others to smile by shooting them.

"Hahahahahahaha!"

Wham

"STOP LAUGHING!"

The emotion she represented was supposed to be something wonderful. Something to allow people to revel in the glory and beauty of living! Not...

Biff

"I ca-ha-ha-ha-han't!"

Pow

...not something forced onto others. She'd learned that the hard way with Riley in baseline. Trying to force her to be happy in a situation that didn't call for it, trying to make her be happy to the exclusion of growing into a better person, had nearly ruined everything.

"STOP IT RIGHT NOW BEFORE I MAKE YOU!"

Oof

"I-hi-hi'm try-hi-i-hee-hee-hee-ng!"

She should be horrified at what she was being made to force on others right then. She should be furious, appalled, despondent. She should be anything but happy about this! If ever there was a situation in which there was nothing to be happy about, it was this one! But she was *Joy* . Without the others to ground her, to temper her, there wasn't anything else she *could* feel. There was nothing else she could *do* .

"THAT'S IT! I'M GOING TO MAKE YOU STOP LAUGHING IF IT KI–"

A 'Joyous Sunburst' flared brightly after it hit.

"–i-i-illll-ee-hee-hee-hee!" (19)

Rock had found the police riot squad rather quickly. Avoiding getting run over by them as they fled the city was a fair bit trickier. Especially

given that he'd been trying to use the Zen Buster to calm them, and they'd been in such a panic that they'd taken it as a threat.

Rock would have made the design less threatening, but... well, guns weren't designed the way they were to be threatening. They were designed that way because the design worked. That it worked in a way that was understandably threatening was just an inevitable side effect.

However, he'd gotten the police relatively calmed down, and followed reports of the one that had attacked them. Helping a few other panicked citizens had narrowed do–

"LOOK OUT!"

Rock turned and immediately performed a limbo maneuver to duck a bolt of purple energy before tracking its origin to a tall and thin purple robot with wide eyes and a long nose.

"Hey, Fe–"

Rock noticed his opponent's eyes flicking towards something behind him and sidestepped as the purple energy bolt whizzed past the spot he'd been in trailing a stiff breeze.

"–ar Man," Rock held his arms up in a way that was meant to be nonthreatening even as he tracked the bouncing projectile that had missed him twice. "I'm not hear t–"

Rock ducked his head to the side

"–o hurt you, I just want to tal–"

Another sidestep thanks to how the emotion master couldn't help but track his own projectile, not even taking an opportunity to fire anoth–

"–k..."

Rock froze up as the projectile abruptly reversed direction and hit him straight in the stomach, ricocheting into the ground before vanishing. A part of his mind idly noted the new projectile bouncing around and deduced that Fear Man had shot a second expressly to redirect the first.

The rest of it was locked up in terror the likes of which he'd felt only a few times before. Almost all of them at the hands of one man.

"Oh geez... oh geez..." Fear Man was hyperventilating, or at least doing a good impression. "THIS IS NOT HAPPENING!"

'No... it is *happening,'* Rock trembled, his mind racing with thoughts of how far in over his head he was. How helpless his tool-using body was in the face of something that could bring the city to its knees with a few well-placed shots. And... *'And someone has to stop it...'*

Rock took a step forward... and a shot to the chest for his efforts, strengthening the terror he felt. He could practically hear the unhinged laughter that haunted his nightmares.

He took another step forwards, and another shot for his efforts.

"What are you doing?! You need to run! Save yourself!"

Another step. Another shot. Another surge of terror.

"And..."

Step.

"...leave..."

Shot.

"...you..."

Terror.

"...behind?"

Wide eyes widened even further in astonishment, and the next thing Rock knew, Fear Man was folded over his fist at his stomach and the index finger on Rock's other hand was forming a motorized screwdriver.

"...Not a chance..."

"Look, I'd rather not fight you, Disgust!" Roll declared as she blocked another of the emotion master's green energy orbs, letting the flower-shaped burst wash over her without effect and wondering yet again why that was.

"Well, duh!" Disgust Woman scoffed as she fired again. "I don't want to fight you either! But, like, I'm not exactly calling the shots here!"

"I noticed!" Roll dodged a third shot and grimaced as she heard a cat screech behind her. Moments later and about fifty cats were filing out of an alley with their noses in the air like they smelled something bad. "Seriously, what is up with your weapon?"

"Oh, you wanna know?" Disgust Woman drawled mockingly as the dance continued. "The moment one of these connects with you, then every girl in fifty feet becomes unable to stand anything. Like total barf city. Or every robot, or everyone under the age of ten maybe. Possibly every blonde. I don't know, it's, like, stupidly random sometimes."

Roll blinked as Disgust Woman turned her arm cannon on herself. "Let me guess, Riley just realized that the two of us have a lot in common right now."

"Duh," Disgust Woman rolled her eyes. "I'd apologize, but being sorry's kind of not my thing."

Roll made a split decision and decided to rush her opponent as she fired on herself, preparing for the feelings of disgust to return and override her emotional processor again. She was so prepared for it to happen that she nearly missed the opportunity to take a swing at her opponent when it didn't.

A moment later, and Disgust Woman was on the ground with her arms bound behind her while Roll prepared to access and remove her IC chip.

"Whaddya know? Being green *is* good for something."

'I still can't believe you managed that!' Fear's mental voice buzzed like a post-survival adrenaline rush. *'That should have been pure stark raving paralyzing terror!'*

"If that was all it took to stop me, my Loops would be a lot shorter on average," Rock muttered as he looked around what had to be the poorest, dirtiest, most depressing corner of Arcadia.

As well as the spot that the string of sadness-inducing freak weather phenom had led straight to. All around, Rock could hear people weeping and wailing about anything and everything. He'd stopped using the Zen Buster on this group after spotting someone weeping over a broken store window and realizing it was an opportunistic rioter caught up in the emotional chaos and judged that these people could be left to the police and the spare handheld Zen Busters Rock had loaned them. (20)

Up ahead, walking at the most despondently slow pace possible, was the short dumpy Sadness Woman, complete with street-wide raincloud over her head that rained the blue energy that had turned so many people into emotional wrecks.

As Rock watched, the raincloud subsided, and almost immediately, Sadness Woman fired a shimmering blue orb over her head that burst into another with a mild roll of thunder.

"Oh... hi..." the emotion master waved half-heartedly when she saw Rock.

"Um... hi?" Rock greeted back in confusion. "Er... could you maybe turn the cloud off for a bit and come with me? The peo–"

"I know, I know," Sadness woman cut him off with a dejected expression, "it's my fault."

"Uh... no it's not," Rock approached as nonthreateningly as he could, trying to see if he could talk Sadness Woman down.

"Don't come any closer!" Sadness Woman cautioned when Rock was a step away from the rain, only for one of her warning hands to convert to a buster and fire a blue orb past Rock's head that formed a raincloud directly behind him. "I..."

"It's fine, I was kind of expecting that," Rock smiled calmly.

"Oh..."

'I wish I could help,' Fear's helpless shrug was evident in his tone.

"Just remind me of what the cost for losing is," Rock whispered as he stepped forwards into the rain. Fear's response was drowned out as a tidal wave of sorrow crashed down upon Rock. Every failure. Every life lost in Wily's wars. Every life he'd been forced to take to end those wars. Every robot who chose deactivation instead of continued existence. The weight of such things was more crushing than the pressure of the deepest oceans.

"I... I'm sorry..." Sadness Woman wept, but made no move to stop her cloud.

'I... I... um...' Fear's voice sounded frantic. *'I... I think some of those people we passed sounded suicidal?'*

Rock felt his systems jolt from that, imagined the crushing sorrow such people's families would feel if they followed through, and

stepped forwards. The rain abated. Rock decided to use the opening to fire the Frantic Fright weapon at Sadness Woman. She didn't even try to dodge it, and the bolt ricocheted off into a building wall and then into the air.

Sadness Woman just looked at him apologetically, raising her buster arm straight up. "Sorry. I'm only really afraid of being crushed under the weight of life's problems. And hurting Riley. And that's kind of already happened. And it's *sad* ."

A moment later, and the sadness-inducing rain had started again, bringing a fresh wave of crushing sorrow with it.

'And... and even if they wouldn't do it themselves, I don't think any of those people are in a shape to run if something dangerous happens... Like a collapsing building... or a stampede of rabid weasels...'

"Why... why are you–" Sadness Woman's question was cut off as she fired a rain-making bolt directly into Rock's chest, only for the tool-using robot to stride straight through the cloud that formed around him, walk up to Sadness Woman, and envelop her in a hug. "How can you stand under the weight of life's problems like that?"

"Because," Rock told her, synthetic tears flowing freely as he used the hug to begin the work to remove the emotion master's IC chip, "I know what it will cost everyone else if I don't."

'–and why are you using a broom of all things? It's like, the uncoolest of uncool weapons,' Disgust continued her rambling as Roll trekked on through the city, studiously ignoring the emotion.

She'd been making gratuitous use of the Zen Buster since arriving at the edge of the riot-heavy part of the city and even with the way her brother designed the pacifying weapon to have crazy energy efficiency, and her resorting to simply knocking a few people unconscious with her broom instead, it was nearly empty. Even with

the addition of the police with hand-held Zen Busters of their own, there didn't seem to be any real dent in the number of berserk rioters. She needed to find the sourc–

"–DEMAND A RECOUNT!"

'Ugh, lovely... I always wanted to see Anger with less restraint. Not.'

Roll ignored the comment and shot forwards before a flaming red energy ball impacted where she'd been standing and passed straight through the street without leaving so much as a scorch mark.

The short and stocky Anger Man noticed her charge and turned to fire at her again, only for Roll to pirouette around the shot and into a spinning strike that caught Anger Man under the chin, lifted him up off the ground, and knocked him back twenty feet.

'Whoa.'

"Bringing in the big guns, huh?" Anger Man grinned as he stood back up and took aim. "Alright! Let's do this!"

Roll dodged to the side and let the blast pass her by as she reformed her arm for the 'Blooming Disgust' weapon she'd gotten from Disgust Woman. No way was she going to try blocking that.

"Come on! Bring it!"

"Consider it brought!" Roll yelled back as she fired. The glowing green orb hit Anger Man and burst into a large flower shape.

"Urgh..." Anger Man grunted and clutched his chest where the shot had hit. And then he dropped to the ground and started banging his head against the pavement. "STUPID STUPID STUPID! I HAVEN'T LEARNED ANYTHING!"

'I could have told you that,' Disgust snarked.

Roll ignored the commentary as she raced to her opponent in a panic. "Stop! If you do that you could damage your IC chip! The–"

The moment Roll grabbed Anger Man's shoulder, the short red emotion master gave a howl of incoherent rage and blasted her point blank with his weapon. Roll froze for a moment in surprise before her vision went as red as her opponent.

The blow from her broom this time knocked Anger Man back fifty feet.

'Hey, dial it back a bit, will y–'

"OH SHUT UP!" Roll yelled in fury as she charged Anger Man.

"RRRRAAAAHHHHH!"

The two met head on, trading physical blows with abandon, but Roll's superior reach proved too much of an advantage to overcome and in a few minutes, Anger Man was down. A furious Roll stood over him, broom held high with the bare end poised to impale her opponent as if it were a spear.

'Look, I'm not a big fan of Anger in the first place–'

Roll's servos tensed and adjusted her aim for her opponent's head.

'–but we KIND OF NEED HIM ALIVE!'

And she brought it down with a crunch of metal.

Rock was going to be sick, despite being physically incapable of it. He'd honestly left Joy Woman for last on the assumption that her power would be the least destructive. Oh how wrong that was.

'Why would someone jump off a building like that?!' Fear wondered in total incomprehension as Rock caught the person just barely in time to make the fall non-lethal.

"Whee!" the young man cheered before Rock set him down. "I'm going to go fly some mo–"

Rock watched in sympathetic horror as the Zen Buster removed the man's good cheer and the reality of what he'd just done hit. The man then proceeded to be sick all over the sidewalk. Rock patted the man on his back and proceeded on his way. It was hardly the worst thing that someone had tried under Joy Woman's influence. Rock had stopped counting the number of car wrecks he'd passed, including several emergency vehicles. Not to mention the vast array of people laughing while trying to walk with severe injuries. His first aid kit array had gotten more use this afternoon than in the last twelve Loops combined. So far, the prize for most disturbing sight had been a pair of paramedics street-surfing on a rolling stretcher, with the injured man strapped to it laughing the whole way until Rock brought them to their senses.

'I feel sorry for Joy...' Sadness sighed. *'She hates hurting people.'*

Rock could relate, but at the rate he was going, he doubted his ability to catch up with her. Unless she was waiting around in one spot, all the time he was using to help her victims would–

"Let's be happy people!" came from a short ways away, followed by a barely visible flash of yellow light. Rock immediately ran towards it.

A quick check, a shot from the Zen Buster, and Joy Woman's latest victim was wasting no time sticking around.

"Yay! More friends to play with!"

Rock turned to Joy Woman and immediately did a double-take. The yellow emotion master looked... unhinged. Her face was frozen in a wide smile, but a smile that gave off the feel of its owner wanting to make *any* other expression, but unable to remember how.

'Look out!'

Rock's inattention was enough for Joy Woman to get off a shot, but he still managed to backstep from it enough to not take a direct hit. But not enough to clear the blast radius as the yellow energy shot burst into a blinding flare of light.

"He..." Rock tried to fight the feeling of mirth that infused him, but it was hard. Especially since this kind of feeling was something he actively sought many other times. "Hehehehe..."

"See? Isn't it better to be happy?" Joy Woman asked like she was desperately seeking someone to disagree with her. "You can forget everything when you're happy! Like how dangerous stuff is! Or that the other guy was just trying to kill you! Or that you're covered in sewage! Or that your house just burned down! None of it matters when you're *happy* !"

'Joy...' Fear gulped. *'Joy's gone psycho...'*

"Hey, I know!" Joy Woman changed topics suddenly. "Let's play a game!"

"Okay!" Rock agreed with a grin before he could really think about it. He liked games! Games were fun!

'You need to fight her!' Sadness reminded him.

"How about boxing?" Rock smiled, what was left of his reason latching onto the advice and taking a stance.

"Okay!" Joy Woman agreed and mirrored him.

'Hey, thanks for aiming for the neck at the last minute,' Anger told Roll after she'd finished storing his IC chip in her arm.

'Yeah, you only scared a decade off my life there,' Disgust added.

'Sounds like an improvement to me.'

"You're welcome," Roll muttered as the two emotions began bickering back and forth.

Rock regulated his breathing as his emotional processor recalibrated. He wasn't entirely sure which of them had suggested shooting themselves halfway through the boxing match, but opportunity to self-target with the Zen Buster had snapped him out of it.

'Okay,' Fear began *, 'now we just need to–'*

"Aww... you're not happy anymore," Joy Woman smiled. "Don't worry, I can fix that!"

Rock dove hard to the side to clear the blast area, took aim with the Frantic Fright, and fired.

"Nice shot!" Joy cheered upon being struck, the shot bouncing off into a nearby alley. "But I'm *afraid* it doesn't work!"

'...Does she actually mean that literally?' Fear wondered as a dog promptly ran out of the alley being chased by a cat.

'She needs to be sad,' Sadness realized.

"Come on!" Joy Woman declared as she opened fire repeatedly, Rock dodging the multitude of shots with wide dives to clear the blast radius. "Be happy! Like me! I've never been happier! And that's saying something! Joy is all! It's supreme! The Alpha! The Omega! Several other letters! It's–"

Rock stopped dodging to fire back with the Sad Raincloud, the sadness inducing weapon bursting over Joy Woman's head even as Rock took her weapon to the chest.

"–It's not like it helps you survive... like Fear..." Joy Woman's manic grin slipped as pure sorrow rained down on her.

Rock snorted in laughter despite himself, and forced his feet to take steps towards the rain. Because this *wasn't* funny.

"Or be healthy, like Disgust... Or get what you want, like Anger... Or connect with others, like Sadness."

Joy Woman's expression fell further and further as Rock made it to the raincloud, and his false humor washed away in the downpour of sadness.

Joy Woman's buster raised to fire on the raincloud above her, only to let out such a pathetic shot that it could have been mistaken for a drunk firefly.

"All Joy does is help you be happy," Joy Woman sniffed morosely, letting her arm fall to her side. "It just... makes more of itself. It's kind of stupid, really... and redundant... It's like... There's no point to it at all!"

'Joy...'

"Everyone always calls the other four the 'negative' emotions, like there's something wrong with them. Like they're bad or something. And I bought into it. Because that made me the 'good' emotion, right? But... but all the others have super-important things that make them super-good. Fear cuts down on injuries, Disgust looks out for your health, Anger seeks fairness and points out problems, and Sadness is like the most important of all because Sadness connects you with others. What does Joy do? Why, Joy leaps straight into danger without looking, dives headfirst into filth without a care, lets problems pile up until they come crashing down, and couldn't care less about anyone other than herself. About anything other than being in charge because she thinks she's the best when she's really the worst."

"That's not true, Joy helps us appreciate the good times," Rock told her, enveloping the emotion master in a hug.

"Yeah, Joy helps you be happy... What did being happy ever get anyone but more happy? More happy and a destroyed life. Because that's what I do. I destroy lives. I nearly destroyed Riley's life trying to make her happy. Because none of the others are bad emotions. *I'm* the bad emotion."

'...'

Rock didn't know how to respond to that. He really didn't. Not right then. So he just went to work removing Joy Woman's IC chip.

The mind workers shivered as they patrolled the shelves of long-term memory. That... thing... in headquarters wasn't supposed to be there. But it was. And it was making them do things for it. Things that would hurt Riley. Things that they couldn't find the courage to not do.

Things like stripping everything out of Imagination Land and Dream Studios to be sent... outside.

Things like breaking into the subconscious so the same could be done for everything locked up in there.

Many mind workers were still working on those...

And now... now they were supposed to send every single memory down into the dump to be forgotten. Every. Last. One.

"Okay..." the head mind worker had told them. *"Start... Start with the faded memories... The ones most degraded already... Priority on anything unimportant... Work your way up to redundant memories and cloudy ones..."*

"Um..." someone had thought to question the complex orders. *"Didn't...* he *... say to... to... get rid of* all *of them?"*

"Yes... it *did... But... we still do it our way... Riley still needs a lot of those memories for as long as we can let her have them... So... we*

do this by the book... Slowly... Take... Take as much time as you can get away with..."

"Joy had something of a breakdown," was one of the first things out of Rock's mouth when he and Roll met back up.

'Oh, there's a shocker,' Disgust sounded in Roll's head.

'Yeah, Psycho Joy all over again,' Anger agreed.

"Disgust and Anger don't seem very sympathetic," Roll sighed.

'More like vindicated,' Disgust insisted.

'Or vindictive,' Anger growled.

'Duh, doofus, they're like the same word or something,' Disgust's sneer was evident. *'Gaw, look in a dictionary sometime.'*

"You want to put them all back together before I try to strangle these two?" Roll asked.

"I think Sadness wants them to apologize first," Rock told her.

'Yeah, that's gonna happen.'

Rock and Roll had thought they were prepared for whatever defenses had been added to Light Labs since that morning. They were nothing of the sort.

The sight of what seemed like bits and pieces of a fairy castle, a cookie (or possibly graham cracker) structure, clouds, and a card house stuck together randomly with a massive roller coaster like Phineas and Ferb liked to build threading in and out of almost every conceivable opening brought them to a stunned halt even before the fact that it was several times the size of the Lab they'd left was taken into account. It was so far removed from their expectations that the

fact that there was a few hundred biker robots; complete with appropriate attire, helmets, and motorcycles; between them and the lab took almost a minute to register.

'Uh-oh...' Joy gulped at the sight of hundreds of robot bikers between the Light twins and Light Labs.

'What?' Sadness asked.

'You guys know that imaginary boyfriend-making machine you saw in the movie?' Joy supplied hesitantly. *'The one I set for a really big 'all 9s' number of copies for a hare-brained scheme to get back to headquarters in baseline?'*

'Yeah...?' Fear replied with palpable nervousness.

'I... may *have forgotten to turn it off first...'*

'Oh dear...'

"Was the guy's name Joe?" Rock asked out loud. (21)

'I dunno... maybe?'

As one, the hundreds of mechanical no-longer-imaginary boyfriends possibly named 'Joe' turned to glare at Rock and Roll as they revved their bikes.

"FOR RILEY!"

Mrs. Andersen bolted for the door when the bell rang, hoping against hope that whoever it was had come with news about Riley. Of course, when she opened the door, she saw something very, very different.

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"...oh god, is that what I think it is?"

"Fear... call for help," Mrs. Andersen's Sadness ordered shakily.

"Y-yes..."

The Real World

"*SHRIIEEK!*"

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"That's the wife!" Mr. Andersen's Fear recognized the sound immediately.

"Our damsel is in distress!" his Sadness declared.

"We're coming honey!" the man's Anger took action.

The Real World

"Jill!" Mr. Andersen bolted towards the noise immediately, Dr. Light right behind him, only to draw up short when his wife dove behind him in fright and he saw just what he was up against.

They looked like the shambling dead straight out of a zombie apocalypse film, save for the fact that the decaying skin looked like tattered latex and the flesh and bones that were exposed were clearly metal. They were zombie robots. There were also quite a few of them forcing their way into the entry hall through the open front door.

"Who are you?!" Mr. Andersen demanded. "What do you want?!"

"I can tell you that," a biker boy said as he pushed his way to the front of the zombie robot horde. "Riley's esteemed mother and father, we are here to take you to your daughter."

"Taaake yoouu tooo Riiilleeyy..." several zombots groaned in agreement.

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"What?"

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"What?"

The Real World

Mr. Andersen came up short. That wasn't what he'd been expecting.

"Riley?" his wife came out from behind him. "Where is she? What have you done to our daughter!"

"Not a hair has been harmed on her gorgeous head, but–"

"And just what does that me–"

"Ahem," Dr. Light interrupted, drawing the Andersens' attention and pointedly drawing his gaze across the superior numbers of the zombie robots behind the biker boy. "Far be it from me to stop a fellow parent's protective instincts, but it occurs to me that our best option right now is to go quietly."

The Andersens exchanged glances and wordlessly admitted that the man had a point.

"Very well..."

"An excellent choice, sir," the biker And I swear to you, on my life, no harm shall come to you on your journey. I would *die* before I let that happen. I do this for Riley. Everything I do is for Riley."

"Er... okay?" Mr. Andersen replied in confusion before allowing the biker boy to lead them and the zombots out of the house.

"Is... is that a giant vacuum cleaner?" Dr. Light wondered as the robo-zombies marched all three adults out of the house towards their

transportation.

"It... it looks like the one my mom uses..." Mrs. Andersen blinked in astonishment.

'We! Did! Not! Die!' Fear cheered as Rock and Roll touched down in front of a large gate. *'WOO!'*

'I have to say, I think that's the first time I've ever seen someone hotwire a unicorn,' Joy added.

"We've had some experience with equine-model circuitry," Rock replied.

"There's an understatement," Roll agreed. "Too bad Rainbow Unicorn didn't make it past the Hockey Z9 rink."

She paused and pinched her nose.

" *Yes* , the lab is bigger on the inside than the outside right now. Stop arguing about it!"

"You want to hand them over to me for safekeeping?"

'I don't want them to be mean to Joy...' Sadness protested.

'Sadness, I told you, it's fine! I'm good now that I'm around you guys again, and I'll be better when we get the whole team back! We all will! Anger and Disgust included!'

"You have no idea," Roll sighed. "Let's talk about it again after we deal with whatever's behind this door."

'Wait, what?' Fear started. *'Shouldn't Riley be behind that door?* '

"Not at all," Roll spoke up, answering Disgust and Anger before Rock could say anything.

"Yeah, we're probably only halfway through right now," Rock agreed, running a hand through his hair, "if that."

'Then shouldn't we try and find a safer way then? Something that doesn't involve possible pain and death?'

Rock and Roll ignored their mental passengers as they stepped up to the gate, waited for it to ratchet upwards, and walked through.

The ground beneath them started moving forwards, towards a branching hallway.

'I do. Not. Like this!' Fear wailed.

"Do you want to take the left or the right?" Roll asked.

"How about–" Rock's reply was cut off as a wall suddenly slammed down between him and his sister, cutting them off from each other.

'Uh-oh...'

'I knew it!'

'DAMNIT!'

'Well, doesn't that just figure?'

Roll stared at the wall that had sprung up between her and her brother while the moving floor under her feet carried her down the right passageway and curved away from her brother.

'We're trapped over here! Trapped!' Anger railed. *'THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!'*

'It really is, you know. If you'd just stayed together, none of this wo–'

"Will you just SHUT UP ALREADY?!" Roll yelled. "We are doing everything we can to save Riley and you ARE NOT HELPING!"

'If you're waiting for an apology, you'd best get over it,' Anger huffed.

'Yeah, that's Sadness's department and she's not here,' Disgust sniffed. *'We're what you're stuck with.'*

"Right now you two are as bad as any psychosis Joy's ever possessed," Roll snarled as a new gate came into view.

'Hey!' Anger shot back. *'That's hitting belo–'*

"I swear, the moment Rock and I meet up again, I am forking you two o..." Roll's fury trailed off as something registered on her auditory sensors.

'You're going to what, exactly?' Disgust demanded.

"Quiet," Roll told them and turned up sensitivity. "Is that... 'Happy Birthday'?"

'Sounds more like a funeral dirge to me,' Disgust huffed.

"No," Roll insisted, despite agreeing that the slow pace was much more somber, and creepier, than 'Happy Birthday' had any right to be. "It's definitely–"

The gate ratcheted up and Roll's words died in her throat as she saw the huge room decked out for a birthday party. With tattered and worn decorations, dim lighting, oversized furniture, and a giant cake that her olfactory sensors told her had probably gone stale a long time ago. Where the hell had all this come from?

'Ew...' Disgust sniffed at the sight.

Roll took a few steps into the room and the gate slammed behind her, echoing loudly.

Then another impact echoed around the room, and another, and another, and another. The impacts getting closer, like giant footsteps.

And then a massive three-story clown appeared out of the shadows, grinning widely at her and hefting an equally oversized mallet.

"WHO'S THE BIRTHDAY GIRL?!"

Rock stared around the twisted fantastical room, listening to a slow, warped song play that he didn't recognize.

Doo...

A sound like a voice drifted up from a far corner and Rock advanced cautiously to investigate.

doo...doo...

'I vote we find the exit and get the heck out of here as fast as possible,' Fear declared. *'Who's with me?'*

doo...doo...

"I don't wanna..." a voice registered to Rock's auditory sensors, coming from what looked like a large pink blob with a brown cloth draped over it stuck in the corner.

doo...doo...

'I know that tune...' Joy puzzled. *'I swear I do.'*

'Me too...' Sadness agreed.

ding... dong...

"Don't... don't make me..."

ding... dong...

"Is someone there?" Rock called out, and the pink blob shuddered, hunching in on itself. To Rock's eyes, the blob looked kind of like...

cotton candy?

'Oh god... it's...'

'It's Bing-Bong...'

"Who's Bing-Bong?" Rock asked.

"You... you know who I am?" the mystery voice asked, the blob of cotton candy stiffening.

'He's... he's Riley's imaginary friend...' Sadness explained.

'Part cotton candy, part cat, part elephant, and part dolphin,' Joy added as the blob turned around and Rock got a good look at the front of it.

"And apparently, part Devil Series," (22) he added in a whisper. He was going to have a talk with his dad later in the Loop about securing certain experiments better.

'And usually a lot smaller!' Fear added.

The creature looked like a Pink Devil made of cotton candy, with striped legs, a fluffed cat tail that popped out from under him as he stood up, a brown hobo-coat and gloves (complete with rainbow flower on the lapel), and a large elephant trunk under its one huge sad eye (sitting in the middle of what would normally be a torso) that hung over a huge frowning mouth.

"Oh no..." Bing Bong trembled upon seeing Rock, despite towering over him like most Devil Series robots. "You... you gotta get out of here little boy... Before I start crying... I... I don't... I don't wanna cry..."

'But... Bing Bong just cries candy...' Joy wondered at the state of the giant imaginary friend.

"A-huh..." the giant Bing-Bong Devil choked back a sob, and Rock's eyes widened as he correlated 'crying candy' and his opponent's aversion to doing so with what the optic control unit that was a Devil Core usually fired from its 'eye' and started moving.

"A-hwaaah!"

Rock dove and rolled as a giant peppermint impacted where he'd just been standing with the force of a cannonball.

The Mind Reader was such a fascinating paper. It was constantly updating with news about Riley's life and events in it, declaring the 'monster' that had taken control of her mind world to be an abomination beyond compare. A cruel and unusual beast in his torment of the young girl, making her watch the news reports of the horrors her unleashed emotions had wreaked on the city. A foul and unfeeling villain who would dare to strip such a lovely girl of her feelings and thoughts. Declared in a mind-wide popularity poll to have a -152% approval rating. (23)

Honestly, he hadn't thought it would be that high (24). He'd have to step things up a bit. Crush some of that passive resistance that the girl was putting up against him. As amusing as the little mind-paper was, it should have been full of self-recriminations at this point.

Slenderman idly caressed one of the glowing memory orbs set into the tiered display he was casually leaning against and allowed himself a sense of satisfaction as one of those islands in the distance rumbled ominously as his touch left a streak of black on the glowing memory. The black streak was swiftly swallowed up by the orb's light the moment he stopped touching it, but it no longer frustrated him. He knew what he needed to clear that particular hurdle. He just had to wa–

"TripleDent Gum, will make you smile!"

Slenderman's faceless head looked up in puzzlement at the soft yellow memory orb that had just dropped into the middle of the darkened, drab Headquarters unbidden and begun playing.

"TripleDent Gum, it lasts a while!"

He stood up, dropping the Mind Reader absently and stepping on it to approach what was now a much more interesting sight.

"TripleDent Gum, will help you mister, To punch bad breath right in the kisser!"

How...

"TripleDent Gum!"

How adorable it was! (25)

The memory replayed as the Slenderman watched it in fascination.

Oh, but he knew why something like this had been sent unbidden. Those lazy little mind workers thought it would get under his skin and frustrate him. Get him to make a mistake. And if he'd been any 'ordinary' intruder, perhaps it would have. Such a jingle was an insidious little mind worm, boring its way into the consciousness of the listener and never leaving. Never losing strength. Always waiting to pop back into the front of the host mind and gorge itself anew.

Much like himself. Just... rather lower on the evolutionary scale.

Slenderman reached up as the jingle repeated again and caressed a single finger across the orb like a person might scratch an adorable little kitten. Blackness spread from where his finger touched the orb, growing rapidly as the chipper song lost all tone and became flat and dead even as it continued playing.

As the last of the yellow light left it, Slenderman removed the orb from the memory player and held it up, tracing an adoring finger over the sphere.

It shuddered and split, uncoiling into a long, writhing, black worm. Slenderman allowed the newborn creature to crawl up his arm and across his thin shoulders, turning his faceless head towards the beastie.

The worm's front section split three ways, revealing rows of jagged teeth along its fleshy interior as its song emanated from the void-like depths of its throat.

"TripleDent Gum... will make you smile..."

Yes, it was very, very adorable. The perfect little pet for what he intended. (26)

"HAPPY–"

Roll jumped backwards as the giant mallet slammed down where she'd been standing.

THOOM!

"–BIRTHDAY!"

'Jangles...' Anger muttered. *'Why the hell did it have to be Jangles?'*

'Seriously, he should have stayed in Riley's subconscious with the rest of the riff-raff,' Disgust sniffed.

Roll focused on avoiding the giant grinning clown and his hammer and tried not to think of how that grin reminded her of the Loops where Clown Man had a creepy crush on her.

'So, are you going to do anything other than dodge, or what?' Disgust added.

"Working on it!" Roll growled as she looked the towering clown over and assessed her options.

"COME BACK BIRTHDAY GIRL!"

Roll thought about a video game she'd been playing in a recent Loop and came to a decision. She watched for another blow, dashed away from the impact, and immediately reversed directions to jump onto the head of the massive mallet and grab on.

'WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK THIS WILL ACCOMPLISH?!' Anger fumed as the mallet rose up, carrying her with it.

"I'm thinking it's time for a little 'Shadow of the Colossus' action," (27) Roll whispered, preparing to jump while Jangles looked for her in confusion.

"Sorry!" Bing-Bong Devil yelled as Rock narrowly slid under another candy shot.

"Not your fault!" Rock called back as he grabbed his opponent's long elephantine nose, used it to swing up within range, and kicked the massive optic that was the Devil Core.

"OW!"

"Sorry!" Rock apologized as he flipped in the air, tossed by the reflexive action, and landed on his feet.

'Is it just me, or is this fight extremely surreal?' Fear wondered.

'I think it's nice they're apologizing to each other,' Sadness retorted.

"It's fine!" Bing-Bong Devil insisted as he held a hand to his eye. "You're doing this to save R-Ril–a-hwaaah!"

Boom

"Sorry!"

"I'm fine!" Rock assured him, grabbing a piece of the floor. "Sorry in advance!"

"About wh–OW!" the imaginary friend-turned-Devil Series yelped as the piece of the floor hit him square in the eye. "Why is it always the eye, anyway?! A-hwaaah!"

Boom

"Sorry!"

"No worries!" Rock ran through his tool options and settled on a taser for his next attempt. "And sorry about the eye, it's the only part that can actually be hurt!"

"Oh, oka–hwaaah!"

Boom

"Sorr–hey, what are you–?" Bing-Bong Devil cut off as his eye tracked Rock running up his trunk, one of his arms sparking at the end.

Ker-ZAP!

"GAAAAHHH! MY EYE!" Bing-Bong Devil reeled, before curling up into a ball and holding his hands over his optic.

"Sorry!" Rock apologized as he landed, bracing himself for the next round, only to blink in puzzlement as his cotton-candy opponent didn't rise.

"Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow..."

'Poor Bing-Bong...'

"You okay?" Rock asked with concern.

"I'll be fine," Bing-Bong Devil answered, waving off Rock's concern. "Nice shot though... Really wish we didn't have to fight like this."

"Me too," Rock agreed, waiting for his massive opponent to stand back up. It didn't happen.

"I mean, I never liked the idea of fighting," the reluctant Devil Series continued. "Always seemed like something only mean bullies did. I only wanted to play with Riley... You know we built a rocket to go to the moon?"

'I don't even know what's going on anymore,' a totally confused Fear stated.

"How was it?"

"Oh, we didn't go," the cat-elephant-dolphin sighed. "Riley got a for-real friend before we could and was too busy with her for imaginary friends like me. But that's not important. You need to save Riley, which means you need to beat me. I'll try and give you a good shot if I can."

"I'd rather not if we don't have to. I mean, we haven't been fighting since that last shot."

"We haven't?" Bing-Bong devil sounded surprised as he sat up straight. "Hey! We haven't! I'm free! I'm free!"

Rock laughed as the giant pink imaginary friend got up and danced around happily. "I must have shorted out your override circuit!"

"I have *no idea* what that is!" Bing-Bong Devil yelled happily as he swept the comparatively tiny Rock into a hug. "Ha-ha-ha!"

'This is awesome!' Joy cheered. *'Now we can all save Riley together!'*

"Oh, hey!" Bing-Bong Devil abruptly halted the hug. "We need to get you to Riley so you can give her emotions back!"

"We need to get my sister Roll first," Rock pointed towards the wall in the direction his sister had been ferried when they were forcibly separated. "I only have three and Riley needs all five."

"Oh... Oh dear... That's where Jangles is..."

'Ack!'

"Who?"

'A clown that performed at Riley's cousin's birthday when she was a toddler and scared her half to death,' Sadness informed him. *'He got stuck in her subconscious with all her other worst fears.'*

'Like those zombies from that one Loop,' Fear added. *'Oh geez! Does that mean there's a robot zombie apocalypse going on now?!'*

"I... I'm not sure I can get through that wall, actually... I mean... I have to cry those candy shots and I'm afraid I'm not in the mood right now..."

"It'll be fine," Rock told the larger being as he jumped up to perch on top of his former opponent's head. "Just... just think about what Slenderman is going to do to Riley if we don't."

"Is he the really scary thin guy?"

"Yes," Rock nodded. "He's already taken her emotions away, and made her do things she'd never ever want to do otherwise. He's made her hurt a lot of people she'd never want to hurt. He wants to make her a bad person. Someone who bullies and hurts others because she thinks she doesn't have any friends. And to make things worse, he's taken away all of the friends that could help her, like you. He wants to make her sad, lonely, and empty. He wants to make her into a person that can't ever have adventures, like going to the moon. Because she won't be able to enjoy them anymore. He wants to make it so that she can't laugh, cry, get angry, disgusted, or

afraid. He wants to make her into a girl who can't love, because she's can't even remember what love is."

"Oh... *sniffle* Th-that did it..." Bing-Bong Devil blubbered in the way that always preceded a torrent of waterworks. "G-get ready... Th*sniff*this is gonna be a big o-o...WHAA–*BOOM*–HAA–*BOOM*–HAA–*BOOM*–HAA–*BOOM*–HAA–*BOOM*–HAA–*BOOM*–HAA–*BOOM*–HAA–*BOOM*–HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!–*BOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOM*–"

The good news: Roll had finally managed to take out one of Jangles's eyes.

The bad news: The pain reflex had launched her towards the towering table with the massive cake on it, leaving her a sitting duck for a retaliatory strike.

"BAD BIRTHDAY GIRL!"

At least, if she didn't jump down at the last moment.

SPLUT

'HAH! TAKE THAT YOU OVERGROWN PIECE OF–' Anger yelled as Jangles' strike flipped the massive stale cake straight into his own face.

'Not bad,' Disgust snorted in roundabout approval as Jangles shook the cake off and began laughing as he hefted his mallet again. *'Though I think you just made him angry.'*

"WHO WANTS PRE–"

The far wall exploded with a sound of rapid cannon fire combined with rampant weeping and Jangles went down to a barrage of what looked like giant butterscotch.

Roll turned to the source of the barrage and saw her brother riding atop the strangest variation of the Devil Series yet.

'WHAT THE HELL IS THAT CLOD BING-BONG DOING HERE?!'

'The whole one eye thing so *does not work for him.'*

"Hey–*sniff*–are you Roll?" the pink Devil asked as it bounded up, and Roll nodded in return as her brother jumped down and gave her a relieved hug. "Nice rocket you've got there."

Roll blinked and watched as the pink Devil bent down to peer intently at her broom, before shaking her head and accessing her arm panel where Anger and Disgust's IC chips were stored. Removing them swiftly, but carefully, she thrust them at Rock. "Here, before something else happens. You focus on getting them to Riley and I'll focus on making sure nothing stops you."

Rock just nodded, opened a panel in his own arm, and slotted Anger and Disgust in next to the other three. As he did, the gate leading out of the room opened up, displaying a long hallway filled with molten lava, in which floated numerous pieces of furniture that were miraculously not burning.

"Huh... your rocket's out of song power," the pink Devil–had Anger called him Bing-Bong?–declared, still looking at Roll's broom.

"Uh, it's a broom..." (28)

"Well, yeah," Bing-Bong shrugged, "those make the best rockets. They store song power really well. I can fix yours real quick if you want. I inhaled a bunch of magic song powder earlier and I think some's still in my nose."

"Really," Roll waved off the offer, "that's fi–"

"*A-CHOO!*"

A sudden spray of pink glittering dust of unknown origin and composition blasted out of Bing-Bong's trunk all over Roll, her broom, and Rock.

"...I am *really* having a talk with dad later about securing experiments better," Rock sighed.

"There!" Bing-Bing smiled. "Now your rocket will work again when you sing the right song. Like this: *ahem* *Who's your friend to likes to play?"*

COPY CHIP ACTIVATED.

SCANNING UNKNOWN ENERGY.

ATTEMPTING TO INTEGRATE.

Rock and Roll both stared incredulously as the bristles of Roll's broom ignited with prismatic rainbow light and she had to tighten her grip against the sudden thrust it had.

"Bi– *THOOM*

Bing-Bong was suddenly not there due to being hit from the side by Jangles's giant mallet.

"HERE'S ONE FOR THE BIRTHDAY GIRL!" Jangles raised his mallet high as Rock and Roll tensed below.

"NO!" Bing-Bong yelled, having just recovered enough for a sloppy diving tackle on the giant clown.

"HEY!" Jangles protested as he stumbled.

"A-hwaa–*BOOM*–haa–*BOOM*–haaah!–*BOOM*!" Bing-Bong cried several candy shots, knocking Jangles over. "Go! Save Riley! I'll take care of him!"

"No, we're not leaving you behind!" Rock yelled frantically as Jangles got back up and hefted his mallet.

"It's fine! I'm just an imaginary friend after all–unh.." Bing-Bong grunted as he caught Jangles's mallet in both hands and held it fast. "Riley doesn't need me anymore! She's got real friends now, like you!"

"Imaginary or not, you're still her friend though!" Rock pleaded, Roll having to hold him back from rushing into danger.

"Of course I am!" Bing-Bong was pushed back as Jangles pressed his larger size, being at least a whole head taller. "I'll always be her friend! This... this is what friends do! I help you, so you can help Riley!"

"But..." Rock tried to protest, only to be interrupted as Bing-Bong shoved back hard enough to knock Jangles off his feet.

"Riley's emotions remember the song, right?" Bing-Bong asked, getting a nod from Rock. "Then go. Save Riley."

Jangles got to his feet, now completely focused on Bing-Bong and the two clashed once more.

"Rock," Roll gripped her brother's shoulder firmly, prompting a teary nod of resignation. She extended her broom shaft a bit (useful for those hard-to-reach corners) to better accommodate both of them before climbing on in front.

"I'll sing," Rock offered. "You put those Quidditch skills to the test."

"Got it."

"Who's your friend who likes to play? Bing-Bong Bing-Bong–"

The broom's bristles ignited with rainbow light once more and in moments, both Rock and Roll were shooting out the open door and

down the hall, well over the deadly lava, leaving a rainbow trail behind them as they went.

"Heh..." Bing-Bong chuckled as he struggled against Jangles, "maybe you'll take her to the moon for me too..." (29)

"My word..." Dr. Light gasped as he and the Andersens were marched out of the... vacuum cleaner... "what has happened with the lab?"

The Andersens were staring for a different reason. They could readily recognize elements in the structure that vaguely resembled some of their daughter's old crayon drawings from when she was younger. Forget the lab, what had happened with Riley?

"Apologies, Riley's parents," the biker boy stood at attention, seemingly heedless of the fact that hundreds of forms perhaps identical to his own were strewn about in varying states of damage. "We cannot take in the loveliness that is Castle Riley. We must go and be presented to the lovely lady herself."

A train whistle sounded, and all three adults watched as a purple train engine, crossed with a tank and vaguely shaped like a shoe, huffed up to them along tracks that appeared directly in front of it and vanished after it passed. (30)

"Come, we must board immediately."

"–His rocket makes you yell 'Hooray'! Bing Bong, Bing Bong–"

Roll weaved her way around every obstacle in her and Rock's path with expert ease, while Rock kept on singing the childish song that appeared to fuel the mysterious energy the broom had been infused with and permitted it flight.

It left him little concentration to contribute to the conversation taking place in his systems.

'Joy, this isn't a little thing,' Disgust insisted, wishing that the mental communications Rock and Roll had deliberately allowed them permitted visual contact as well. *'Sadness says you didn't just call yourself a bad emotion, you actually believed it!'*

'She really did, it was heartbreaking.'

'Guys! I'm fine! Really!' Joy insisted. *'I've learned my lesson and I'm better for it! I know every emotion has a role to play, and I'm never going to try and repress any of you from doing your job again! Honest!'*

'Joy, that's not what we're talking ab–' Fear tried to cut in.

'And besides,' Joy talked over him, *'we need to focus on saving Riley from this 'Slenderman' thing, so why don't we talk about tha–'*

'Cut the crap, Joy,' Anger interrupted firmly. *'Look, I'm as glad as anyone that you're not going psycho on us, but I'm not sure I like this direction either. If we're going to save Riley, we need everyone at their best, especially you.'*

'Yeah, righ–' Joy tried to wave the concern off, only for Anger to interrupt her again.

'I don't know if you've noticed Joy, but without you, we're a mess!'

'Look, the thing in baseline was totally unders–'

'I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT THE DAMN BASELINE! DID YOU SEE WHAT WE WERE LIKE WHEN WE GOT SEPARATED TODAY?! AFTER A FEW MINUTES RILEY DIDN'T NEED THAT 'OVERRIDE' THING FOR ME TO GO ON A RAMPAGE ACROSS THE CITY! I DID IT ALL BY MYSELF!'

'It's true!' Fear added. *'I thought I could figure out a way to stop this mess, but all I managed was to make people run away from it, and I'm not really sure that helped!'*

'I kind of stopped caring pretty early,' Disgust added. *'Like none of it really mattered.'*

'I gave up,' Sadness sighed. *'Because you weren't there to stop me. Like last time.'*

'Sadness, look, that wasn't–'

'You wouldn't let me give up. Because that's what you do, Joy. You don't give up. You don't let us give up, and you don't let Riley give up. She needs that. Now more than ever.'

'Besides, you're not just one of Riley's emotions, you're her nature,' Fear told her.

'Huh?'

'Seriously,' Disgust snorted, *'read the mind manuals sometime. First emotion formed is the natural leader, so suck it up and start leading.'* (31)

'What if the first emotion is really bad at leading?' Joy asked.

'Nothing good,' Sadness answered. *'Sorry, that wasn't helping, was it?'*

The thing in her head needed to go. She was very certain of that. Mostly certain of that.

It wasn't that she was afraid of it, or angry at it, or disgusted by it. The thought of it staying didn't make her sad, nor did the thought of it leaving make her happy.

Because she couldn't feel anything at all. Because her emotions had left her all alone. Without any guidance as to how to react to the thing's presence in her head. Without any guidance as to what to do about the bad things it was pressing her to do. At least, she was sure they were bad things. Possibly. Maybe. What reference did she even have to judge anymore?

They were never coming back. Why would they with their newfound freedom? Free to indulge in their hysterical mania, unleash their untempered rage, wallow in the pits of despair, flee in abject terror, and judge with unhindered contempt. That was what they were made to do after all.

It wouldn't subject her to that. It would guide her and protect her from the uncaring dredges of the multiverse. Show her how to protect herself. Spread the gloriousness that she would be a part of to others. All she had to do was stop fighting the inevitable. Stop resisting her natural urges. Invite him to stay and fill the void left in her mind.

And it would ensure she was never alone.

"Shut... up..."

No.

"–Who's the best in every way, and wants to sing this song to say: Bing Bong, Bing Bong!"

Roll sighed in relief as she finally set her broom down in front of the gate leading to... whatever new threat was behind it. The song may have worked, and the individual it was about certainly praiseworthy, but... well... it was exceedingly juvenile, and short to the point that continuous repetitions had grated on her auditory processors.

Maker, but she was going to have that song stuck in her head now...

The gate ratcheted up and Roll took point in front of her brother, ready to meet whatever threat was inside head-on.

"We're here..." Rock breathed in surprise as they both looked around the lab room that this entire mess had started in. It was larger, thanks to whatever was expanding the space inside the lab, but is was recognizable. The original download area still had an unused generic male robot frame in it, there was a screen which showed a darkened view that looked to be Riley's Headquarters (seemingly empty) based on descriptions given to them both, and there at the far end, still hooked up to the improved Mind Machine, sat Riley herself. Right next to the control console that they'd set up, still functioning and looking largely untouched.

Rock and Roll nodded to each other and dashed towards Riley's location, Roll taking a rear flank position and scanning the room for threats while Rock focused on getting to Riley.

Which might have been why neither of them noticed the forcefield generators added to the floor until it activated right between them and knocked Roll on her butt when she crashed into it.

That had been rather easy to accomplish. He had thought separating them would be harder.

"Slenderman!" Rock growled as he searched for the source of the mental intrusion. He found no trace of the memetic entity. "Roll, are you alright?"

"I'm fine! Don't worry about me! Just get Riley's emotions back to her!"

Yes, he should really do that quickly. There was no telling what kind of damage had been done to the girl already. As for his sister, she would have her hands full.

"Damnit..." Rock swore as he realized that line of thought hadn't quite been his. Weighing his options, he quickly decided that he

didn't have much of a choice and ran for the console.

After all, what would this little invasion be without a Riley Machine?

Roll heard a whirring of machinery behind her and turned just in time to dive away from a barrage of hockey pucks, tucking and rolling into a battle-ready crouch before taking a good look at... at the unholy love child of a Zamboni and a tank.

"Double that damnit," she cursed as crossbow turrets mounted on the sides of the thing started firing hockey sticks at her. She dove and tumbled out of the way and wished that her broom had a bit more oomph to it.

'Who's your friend who lik–' Roll shook her head hard. She didn't need that song stuck in her head right now! Even if it interacted with that strange magic powder and gave her broom flight, it–

Roll blinked as a memory from her time in Hogwarts crossed her mind. A conversation she'd had with Harry about the importance of incantations and wand movements. According to him, most Loops they weren't as critical as most people thought. Sure, they helped channel, focus, and shape spells, but the most important thing to magic was intent.

Roll gripped her broom rightly as she stared down the Zamboni from heck, determined to give her brother all the time he needed to get Riley's emotions to her. She thought about the mind-born friend of Riley's who'd sacrificed himself so they could get this far. The one who'd obliviously enchanted her broom in the first place. The one whose song was already stuck in her head. Maybe... just maybe if she changed the song a bit... she could use the enchantment to fight instead of fly.

It just needed to be a song with the right intent.

"Who's the friend who saves the day?"

Roll grinned as the bristles of the broom lit up with rainbow light, forming a shimmering spearhead of pure magical energy.

"Bing-Bong Bing-Bong!"

Dr. Light fiddled with the contents of his pocket as covertly as he could while his and the Andersens' captors ferried them through 'Castle Riley'. He did have to grudgingly marvel at how fast and effectively the Slenderman, vile being that he was, had put the very experiments Dr. Light had been working on, combined with what seemed to be the contents of Riley's imagination, to use constructing this place. Experiments that he'd only been working on because he'd believed that without Dr. Wily in the Loop there was little chance of them being subverted to cause harm.

He sighed and continued his work as the train chugged on through a room that housed a giant robotic clown, damaged beyond operation, and a smashed Devil Core (on loan from Rock's subspace pocket) amidst a mass of what looked like pink cotton candy.

"That looks like the imaginary friend Riley drew in those old books of hers..." Mrs. Andersen gasped at the sight.

"Didn't you say there was a clown that scared her at her cousin's birthday party?" Mr. Andersen asked, sounding in shock. Dr. Light could hardly blame either of them. The whole thing was rather shocking.

"Yes, she cried for almost half an hour..."

"Who sends the bad guys far away? Bing Bong, Bing Bong!"

Roll had to grin as the magical spearhead tore through the machine's armaments and scored its armor with much more ease than just her broom would have managed.

"The bravest one in every way, and so we shout his name today! Bing Bong, Bing Bong!"

She jumped onto the hood in a handstand when one of the surviving puck-shooters tracked her position and was about to launch herself over the whole machine when a weakness that she was very much unused to war machines having finally registered.

Namely that the driver's seat was empty.

Roll checked her momentum so she dropped into the seat rather than clearing the whole machine. Only at the last moment did it occur to her that it might be a trap... but nothing happened.

Not only did nothing happen, Roll spotted an ignition behind the steering wheel complete with keys in it. Acting fast, she reached out and turned the keys to the off position, causing the whole machine to sputter and shut down. She waited for a moment to confirm that it was indeed off before removing the keys and breathing a sigh of relief.

"TripleDent Gum... will make you smile..."

"What in the world?" Roll puzzled as she heard the muffled sound coming from in front of her.

"TripleDe–"

"–AAAHH!" Roll screamed as a huge black three-jawed worm erupted from the steering wheel like a deploying airbag and went straight for her face.

'Okay, memetic lifeform, eldritch abomination, actually an Admin-level douchebag stuck in an avatar, and doing who-knows-what to Riley's head,' Anger repeated back in annoyance. *'Anything else we need to know?'*

'Besides hurry?' Joy added.

"Yeah," Rock continued working on the console, configuring the Mind Machine for downloading to Riley's mind direct from the IC chips rather than being hooked up to their robot bodies as previously intended. "His avatar, like what he probably was originally, is a being of pure thought."

'Uh, yeah,' Disgust spat, *'what does tha–'*

"Just like you all are."

'–oh... Oh!'

'So...?' Fear wondered.

'...We can hurt *him,'* Anger chuckled eagerly.

"Just remember that goes both ways," Rock reminded as he finalized the settings and double-checked them. There was zero room for error on this.

Roll was immensely glad for her mechanical reflexes. It was the only reason she wasn't being face-hugged by a giant singing black worm with three jaws and teeth. She'd caught it with her broom just in time and smashed it against the dashboard where the worm-thing had gone splat and stuck like a wad of gum. She'd just barely managed to pull her broom away, thankfully without black worm goo on it, only to watch the worm start to reform. She'd exited the vehicle rather fast at that point.

'Okay, let's see how you like a bit of magic song power!' Roll set her face in determination. *"Who's the friend who saves the day?"*

The broom lit up like before and she prepared to meet the little beast when it came for her. It had finished reforming and was opening its three jaws even now.

"Bi–"

"–nt Gum... it lasts a while..."

Roll stared as the prismatic song power fizzled out completely.

"That's not good..."

"TripleDent Gum... will help you–"

She barely recovered from her distraction enough to get her arm between her face and the lunging worm-thing, allowing its jaws to latch onto her arm firmly rather than her face.

'–mister... To punch bad breath right in the kisser...'

Had she been capable, Roll would have paled as the worm's song began sounding directly in her head, accompanied by a looming image of Slenderman himself. An image that conveyed a sense of total futility and urged her to simply give up and let him in.

"LIKE HECK!" she yelled, slamming the bitten arm into the side of the Riley Machine. The worm splatted again, but its triple jaws and related teeth refused to let go of Roll's arm. Running through her options, Roll decided to start shooting it with the emotion weapons and hoping for the best, starting with what little she had left of the Zen Buster and praying from there.

'TripleDent GuuuUU–'

The shot caused the splatted goo-worm to writhe in response and let go of Roll's arm.

"–uummmMMMmm..."

Switching, Roll fired again before the worm could reform and lunge at her again.

"TripleDeeEEeeNNnt–"

Frantic Fright didn't have much more effect than the Zen Buster and Roll had to move her head to the side as it ricocheted back at her.

"–Gum... wiiiIIIiiLLll–"

Angry Flame wasn't much better.

"–make you smmmMMmIIii–"

Nor was Blooming Disgust.

"–le... TrippPpPLLlle D-D-D-DeeeEEnnnTT G-G-GuuummMmM..."

Sad Raincloud had promise, but it wasn't really slowing the thing down as it finished reforming and began a lunge.

"–it lAAaaAAasSSssTTtssSSs AAAAAAAAAAA W-w-W-hhHHiiILLLeee..."

Joyous Sunburst seemed to hit paydirt as a yellow glow overtook the black for a bit before being pushed back and seeming to make the worm-thing angrier. Better than the others, but not good enough.

'Okay, new strategy,' Roll thought as she switched to something from her housekeeping toolkit. Her arm finished reforming as the worm-thing lunged, and she pointed the device straight down its throat and fired even as it latched onto the end of her arm and its insidious song and the accompanying insidious image returned, eating away at her mind and resolve.

'TripleDent Gum... will h~elp yo~u mis~ter...'

The tool she'd selected was basically a freezer spray. Not very powerful, being only as cold as the average commercial freezer, but good for cooling off warm drinks.

'T~o p~un~ch b~a~d... br...ea...th... r...ig...ht...'

And cleaning off gum stuck to desks those times she'd gone to school.

'i...n... t...h...e... k...i...s...s...e...r...'

The writhing of the worm-thing slowed down and cracks began to form in its body from its own struggled as Roll kept pumping cold air into its core, more and more until the thing stopped moving at all, at which point she smashed it against the Riley Machine and watched in satisfaction as the pieces did nothing but lie there.

Her satisfaction was cut short as the gate to the room ratcheted up and an odd-looking train chugged in.

Roll turned to look and felt her circuits run cold as she saw her father and Riley's parents being held at gunpoint by one of those Biker Joe/imaginary boyfriend robots from before, along with a pair of zombie robots. Mostly, the gun was pointed at her dad, but Roll didn't believe for a second that it couldn't be turned on the Andersens.

Sparing a glance, Roll spotted her brother slotting the emotions' IC chips into the console and willed him to hurry up.

"You will both stop everything right now and step away from the lovely Riley and all computers or else suffer the consequences!" the boyfriend-bot declared loudly as the train ground to a halt.

Roll saw Rock hesitate for a moment, and then press the button to start the download.

"I'm sorry, what was that again?" Rock turned around, feigning confusion and ignorance rather well in Roll's opinion.

"I said you are to step away from that console before you bring harm to my love Riley!" the boyfriend-bot called again as he directed the three adults off the train. Roll didn't miss the intense scowl on Mr. Andersen's face at his declaration.

"Sure thing," Rock held his hands up in a gesture of surrender and did as asked. Roll did the same from where she stood. They'd done their part. Now it was up to the emotions.

Joy looked around Headquarters the moment she manifested and felt her heart sink.

The place was a wreck. It was darkened everywhere, with colors faded so far that in the shadows, Joy couldn't tell what they were even supposed to be. Littered all across the floor, rather than in the short-term wall storage where they were supposed to be, were dozens of blackened memory orbs. A look behind her showed the other emotions looking just as stunned as she was and a control panel that was nearly black from inoperability. In place of the simple viewscreen camera the Lights had helped them to set up via relayed instructions for a video feed that never quite got finished, there was an entire array of cameras straight from Dream Studios.

"Is... Is he going to film us?" Fear wondered, looking at the camera setup.

He'd been expecting them.

Joy and the others looked around, hoping to find where Slenderman was hiding, but saw nothing. Only the soft light of the core memories, safe and untouched in their holder. The pre-awake core memories on a small bottom tier, overshadowed by the larger tier above holding the baseline and looping core memories, with a brilliant near-white prismatic glow from the center of the top tier.

"He... hasn't touched the core memories?" Sadness wondered.

"Then... we made it in time!" Joy felt relieved.

Yes, they were right on time.

"You..." the very tired and weary monotone of Riley sounded throughout Headquarters, even as a thin shadow peeled itself away from the edge of the window, standing tall, straight, and sinister in the strongest source of light in Headquarters as it strode over to the core memory holder.

"You... came back..."

And paradoxically, far too late.

DONG

The sound was so thoroughly unexpected, and the response to it so ingrained, that the five emotions couldn't help but turn to look at the memory dispenser as a pitch black memory orb radiating pure shadow dropped in.

"No..." Fear stared in horror as the blackened core memory orb trundled its way down towards the core memory holder, which was even now shifting to accommodate the new addition.

The center portion holding the nearly-clear prismatic orb for Unity Island rose up to reveal a new housing spot directly underneath it.

"S...Someone... stop i–" Joy moved forwards on protective instinct, only for a sharp impact to the chest to bring her to a halt.

Slenderman casually knelt down to pick up the orb personally while holding his other arm out towards Joy, a tendril like darkest shadow extending from it. As he held the orb, shadows seemed to flow from his arm and into the orb, darkening it even further if at all possible.

"Joy...?" Disgust turned to look at the normally brilliant emotion, her glow was so much a part of her that the rest rarely gave it any thought. She no longer had it.

Joy herself was transfixed on Slenderman's actions as he thrust the black core memory into place.

He had won.

"Oh god... Joy..." Fear trembled.

As did Headquarters. From the black core memory sprouted dozens of shadowy tendrils that wrapped around the core memory holder, and the core memories themselves, scorching the shining core memories black and dull where they touched, save for the brilliantly clear prismatic one at the pinnacle, but even that dulled from the tendrils' touch. What light was left to the core memories pulsed weakly as outside the far window, a tidal wave of black erupted from below, carrying pieces of Riley's Islands of Personality with them, cutting all the lines of power save the one for Unity Island directly below. As they watched, the wave of black formed into a truly massive giant replica of the impossibly thin Slenderman, the remains of the Islands of Personality, already gray and faded, sticking to it like some cruel and macabre parody. Family Island, the most intact of them all, lay in the giant replica's outstretched hand, gripped so tightly it cracked.

Joy's chest hurt at the sight and she raised a hand to it, only to find an obstruction. Weakly, she looked down to see the tendril of blackness stuck straight through her, her normally yellow skin turning gray and dull around the wound.

The tendril retracted suddenly and Joy fell to the ground like a puppet with her strings cut.

"JOY! NNNOOOOOOOOO!"

"RRRRRAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHH!"

A rumble of thunder, a burst of flames, and soundless laughter echoed through Headquarters as Joy lay there unmoving. (32)

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"What just...?"

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"Did that thing... kill Riley's Joy...?"

The Real World

The Andersens could only stare in horror at the sight projected above, a raincloud forming in Riley's headquarters while a squat humanoid mass of flames charged the being known as Slenderman.

"Oww! I... Aaaah!"

And then Riley started writhing in pain from her seat.

"Riley, my love?" the biker robot started at the sound. "What is wr– *BZZAP*

Dr. Light had needed no further opening to take the jury-rigged tazer out of his coat pocket and zap the robot, relieving the machine of his gun as he fell and turning on the zombie-robots escorting him and the Andersens.

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG!

The zombie-bots weren't getting up anytime soon.

"Quickly, we need to get–"

"–Down!" Roll yelled, diving in front of them, her hands having been traded out for mirrors, which reflected lasers fired from the wall behind Riley. "Behind the train! Move!"

"Hold on!" Rock called. "I think I can–gah!"

A battered copy of the Mind Reader fluttered a bit, the only two words on the front page reading **'JOY'S DEAD?!'** as the heatwaves

from Anger's flames burst against the Slenderman and his shadowy tendrils inside the rain of pure sadness.

The rain was a brilliant blue, and as thick and intense as Sadness's weeping over the loss of Joy, her best friend outside Riley. Each drop that struck the Slenderman burned his dark form blue at the point of impact before being swallowed up by his natural darkness.

"JOOOYYY! WHHYYYYYY-HYYY-HYYY-HYYYYYYY?!"

Anger for his part had never been in such a fury. Even when separated from the rest of the emotions with nothing to temper or control him, he hadn't been this mad. All thoughts of the mission had fled in the fire of his fury, his only goal being that *the eldritch beanpole had to die* . His body burned as he charged the Slenderman again and again, bolts of flames from his hands burning away the tendrils sent at him, leaving the scorched edges red for a moment as he charged past, intent on destroying the one who had caused so much pain and suffering.

And each time, his charge was ultimately met with a spinning kick or a backhand that sent him flying even as the flames that engulfed him scorched the limb red for a moment. But he got back up each time, the injuries only serving to stoke his rage.

"RRRAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

Fear and Disgust had stared as Sadness and Anger lost all semblance of control and went berserk, manifesting a massive raincloud right in headquarters in the case of Sadness and performing a full-body ignition for Anger. They'd exchanged glances and proceeded to jointly drag the unmoving Joy behind the inoperable console.

At least, inoperable to them. Right after Sadness and Anger had lost it, Slenderman had held a single hand out towards the blackened console and the various buttons and levers had started moving on

their own, the sickly sparking idea bulb pulsing with each phantom-driven movement.

"Oh, this is bad, very bad!" Fear was practically hyperventilating.

"Get ahold of yourself, Fe–"

"Do you know how to revive an emotion that's been impaled?! Because I don't! We haven't even been back here for ten seconds and we've lost Joy!"

"And if you don't get a hold of yourself, we might lose Anger or Sadness!" Disgust snapped. "Then what?!"

"I don't know!" Fear moaned, huffing rapidly. "You saw what happened! One shot! *One shot* !"

"Yeah, well you can sit here with your pity party and let that thing do whatever to Riley," Disgust sneered at him. "Me, I'm going to do something about it."

And with that, Disgust turned to dash out into the chaos of Headquarters, flashes of green flower shapes shining with each step she took.

"Hey, wait!" Fear called after her. "This is a bad idea!"

What could they do against the one who had felled their leader? Nothing. It was better to hide. To cower in fright. To let the abject terror fuel the new ruler of–

"Wait, what?" Fear started as he realized the direction those thoughts had taken. "Am I really making him stronger hiding back here?"

He-he-he-he-he...

Fear gulped loudly. Going out there would be very dangerous to himself. Staying here could be dangerous to everyone else.

"Oh..." he turned to look at the prone Joy. "What do I do?!"

"Ri..." the barest whisper sounded from Joy's still form. "...ley..."

Fear blinked owlishly for several moments, before taking a deep breath and steadying himself to a mere shiver rather than full-blown tremors. "Right... stupid question..."

Appropriate for a fool about to perish.

"I am so going to regret this!" Fear yelled as he dashed out into the chaotic storm right in headquarters.

The rain fell thick with Sadness's sobs, leaving pinprick flashes of blue on the black tendrils lashing about. Flashes of flame lit Headquarters as Anger blasted a berserker rage through the storm, carving the darkness and leaving the burned edges read. Wide green flashes lit the ground with Disgust's steps and turned several shadowy tendrils green and began to dissolve them. In the center, the Slenderman ducked and wove with movements physically impossible even for the emotions, batting both Anger and Disgust away whenever they got too close, seemingly uncaring for the assault upon him.

It was into this that Fear dashed, screaming, flailing his arms about wildly and hoping to do something. He was surprised when bolts of purplish air were thrown from his hands and bounced their way through the chaos, leaving purple marks whenever they hit Slenderman's shadowy tendrils, breaking them at the point of impact. Apparently their time as robots had left something of an imprint or–

One of the flailing tendrils of shadow slammed into Fear, tossing him head over heels to crash into the core memory holder. The core memories rattled, but the tendrils covering the holder, and corrupting the core memories, held them in place. His gaze was drawn to the black core memory, radiating shadows and the seeming source of

the choking tendrils that were determined to suck the life out of Riley's very personality, all the things that made her *her* .

He was overcome by an extremely strong certainty that the core memory *wanted* him. Wanted him to reach out so it could draw Fear into it an–

Something wrapped around his leg, pulling Fear away before he could touch the core memory–when had he even started reaching for it anyway?– and flung him to the opposite side of the room to crash among one of the larger piles of discarded blackened memories.

"Ow..." Fear moaned, reaching out to brace himself into a sitting position and felt a mild fizzing sensation in his hand as he did. He turned and saw that he'd grabbed one of the blackened memories, except that it was no longer black.

As he watched, a scene of Riley watching news footage of their earlier rampage played amidst a purple hue as the memory orb finished its conversion from a blank perspective to a fearful one.

'But... only Sadness can do something like this, right?' he wondered, looking over the memory. It–

It mattered not if he fought or fled. Either action would feed the Slenderman's strength.

Fear looked up in time to see Anger being thrown into Disgust by their mutual opponent and knew what he had to do. Eyes on the prize, he took off running. And screaming.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA–"

Yes, little agent of terror. Serve your master with your action–

"–Sorry,busywithsomethingelserightnow," Fear gibbered as he duck, wove, and slid through the rain and the chaotic mass of shadowy tendrils lashing about... and right past a suddenly confused

Slenderman, "leaveamessageatthesoundofthescreamandwe'llgetbacktoyouathalfpastnever–AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

He jumped like a panic-guided missile straight for the black core memor–"Ooof!"

And was knocked off-course at the last moment.

What was he thinking, anyway? Such a thing would devour his essence and leave nothing lef–

A blazing, fiery Anger slammed bodily into the Slenderman, knocking him off-balance with a flash of red, followed by a flash of green as Disgust performed a rather sloppy drop-kick.

"AAAAA-HUAAAHH-HAAA-HAAAAAAAAAA!" Sadness continued to wail, the rain intensifying in a fresh wave as she did.

"Whatever you're gonna do, do it already!" Anger yelled at him as the impossibly thin abomination recovered, his shadows burning away the color he'd been afflicted with as he retaliated.

Fear didn't even waste time nodding, he just sprang forwards, over a tendril, under another, twisting around a third, throwing bolts of purplish air at the tendrils holding his target in place, and diving in the most desperate hand-outstretched manner he was capable of. He hit the black core memory like a bullet, felt a burning sensation in his hand as he knocked it loose, and flew straight through its holder in a way only his naturally rail-thin form could manage.

He hit the ground in an uncontrolled roll, clutching desperately to the dark core memory as he went, refusing to relax his hold for any reason. When he finally came to a stop, he risked a look at the core memory and was rewarded with a view through the familiar brightly-shining purple color and heard Riley's voice from within it.

"You... came back..."

'I was afraid you wouldn't.'

Except... his purple hadn't taken away all of the shadow-radiating blackness. Only a portion of it. He frantically moved his hands over the memory, trying to fix it, and it seemed to work a bit, but for every part that turned purple past a certain point, the blackness reclaimed an equal portion.

He... he wasn't enough...

Fear looked up, to see Anger blasted across the room once again–how many times had it happened now?–and realized: He wasn't enough by himself.

"Anger! Go long!" Fear yelled and threw the core memory at his fellow emotion with all his might before turning and charging at the most terrifying thing he'd ever come across.

'Thisisabadidea,thisisabadidea,thisisabadidea,thisisabadidea,THISISABADIDEA–' he chanted to himself as he wove through the shadowy tendrils, flung bursts of bouncing purple air to clear the way, rushed past Disgust, and with all the desperation of a cornered animal, kicked Slenderman in the face.

The impact cracked the abomination's head back so hard that his spine seemed to fold in half at the waist in precisely the opposite direction human anatomy typically allowed.

'–Did I actually just DO tha–'

He was so shocked that he never saw the retaliatory blow that blasted him into the wall.

Rock grunted, clutching where he'd been hit as he ran to the back of the room. He could hear Roll doing her best to defend their dad and the Andersens from the sudden attack. He could hear the cries of

Riley as she convulsed in pain. He could also hear the sounds of the battle taking place in the girl's mind.

He ignored it and focused on the control panel he'd spotted on the wall. The best thing he could do now was to get to that thing and try to cut off Riley's access, and by extension Slenderman's, to the lab's systems.

Behind him, he heard the sound of damaged machinery rumbling to life under protest, and his sister's response to it.

"Oh come on! I turned that off!"

Anger caught the memory orb out of reflex before he even knew what it really was. By the time it registered, a glowing red was eating away at the blackness to join the purple already there. He felt his fury blank out in astonishment as he watched the scene through his own color, viewed both outside and inside Riley's head.

"You... came back..."

'You left in the first place.'

"It..." Anger choked on the words. "It was a bad idea... We never should have tried it... We–"

–will all fall to the inevitable.

Anger felt his temper flare up as he turned to look at the Slenderman, fending off both Fear and Disgust. He watched the thing grab Disgust by the throat with one of its shadowy tendrils and throw her at him.

He was already moving, rearing back to throw the orb at Disgust. It slammed straight into her stomach, causing her to grasp it by reflex as Anger vaulted over, igniting as he rejoined the fray.

Roll's broom, and a borrowed hockey stick, spun like a blur as she deflected hockey pucks and sticks fired from the already damaged Riley Machine, preventing them from possibly harming the adults behind her while they sought cover behind the train.

Sparing a glance back, she noted that they were out of the firing line and decided to go on the offensive. As she leaped high into the air, something on the back of the machine opened up and she beheld a rather large impact explosive primed to fire in a high arc.

"Oh, no you don't!" Roll called out, hefting her borrowed hockey stick like it was a spear. This was going to hurt, but better her than the others.

She threw the spear with stick with all her might like a javelin, striking the impact-triggered explosive squarely and detonating it before it could even clear the machine.

KA-BOOM!

"Roll!"

"You... came back..."

'Do you even know what happened while you were gone?'

Disgust tuned out the sobs of Sadness and the sounds of battle as she watched the scene in the memory play through her own shining green light and felt lower than dirt. The orb was now less than half the shadow-emanating blackness it had originally been, with shining purple, red, and now green holding back the emotional void it had once been.

"Don't worry," she scowled towards the source of all the pain Riley had been forced to endure and then glanced over to the side where Sadness sat, still weeping up a very literal storm, "we'll fix this."

Dashing towards the weeping emotion, Disgust shook her by the shoulder.

"JOOOOYYY...! SHE'S GOO-OOO-OO-OOONNEE!"

"Sadness, snap out of it!" Disgust shook harder.

"What's the use?!" Sadness wailed. "We lost Joy! Without Joy, we can't save Rile-ee-ee-eeyy!"

"I'd apologize, but you seriously need this," Disgust huffed before slapping Sadness sharply across the face.

"Wh-what was that for...?"

"That was because Riley needs you to pull yourself together so we can pull *her* together!" Disgust snapped, before thrusting the partially-converted core memory into Sadness's hands. "Here, n–"

Disgust was suddenly yanked backwards away from Sadness.

Dr. Light ran to where his daughter had been thrown by the explosion, worry in his face. He nearly forgot the defensive lasers the room had been firing until a sharp cry from the back of the room sounded out, followed by loudly sparking electronics, the lights flickering, and the defensive lasers powering down.

"Rock!"

Sadness hadn't quite noticed Disgust being pulled away. She was too engrossed in the sight of her shining blue reaching out from her hands to wash away the foul emotionally empty blackness on the core memory.

"You... came back..."

'I was so alone...'

What... what had she been doing? Crying to herself while Riley needed her help? Again?

Face firming up, Sadness checked over the core memory, the blue glow following her hands as it and the other colors shoved each other in a complex swirling pattern. It looked... It looked like each color took up roughly one-fifth of the orb. Which meant...

Which meant they still needed Joy...

Sadness had just resolved to run the orb towards the downed Joy when it was slapped out of her hands and something wrapped around her neck, choking her as she was raised into the air. Looking out, she saw that it was a tendril of shadow, connected at the other end to the Slenderman. With three more, each holding a different emotion up by the neck.

Mr. and Mrs. Andersen, along with their emotions, looked at the display in horror as the thing possessing their daughter held her remaining four emotions up by their necks and seemed to be choking the very *color* out of them.

It was hopeless. It had always been hopeless.

But they'd had to make it difficult. Do things the hard way and fight against the inevitable. And they'd paid the price.

They should have known. Laughter dies, tears run dry, fury burns out, distaste withers, and panic exhausts. In the end, only the emptiness is left. The emptiness and the madness.

Joy was having a lot of trouble thinking. Her mind kept bouncing between how much her chest hurt, and how much Riley was in trouble.

Part of her really wanted to get up and help, but she just wasn't feeling it. It was like all of her get up and go got up and went. And she'd had a lot of get up and go. Enough that she really should have noticed it leaving like that.

Like the weird swirly, glowy memory orb in front of her. When had that gotten there? Joy looked on as the scene was colored purple, then red, then green, then blue, and finally black.

"You... came back..."

'Of course we came back,' Joy thought in puzzlement. Each of the emotional inflections sounded like they were missing something, but the last was missing everything. *'It doesn't matter why we leave or how far we go, we'll always come back to you, Riley.'*

It just... didn't make sense. Where was the girl, happy or otherwise, who couldn't be kept down? Who never stopped fighting and never stopped trying? Where was her 'never-say-die' attitude?

After all, Fear...

Fear would just get her to hide somewhere until it was over.

Okay, Anger...

No, Anger would rage and break things over the indignity of it all.

Maybe Disgust...

Pfft... Disgust would throw up her hands and say she was through with everything.

Well, then definitely Sadness...

Except Sadness had already proven willing to go cry in a corner when things got too tough.

Puzzled, Joy struggled to move her hand, reaching out to the shadowy black part of the memory orb on an instinct she couldn't define.

After what seemed like an eternity, her hand made contact and Joy felt a sharp drain on what little strength she had left as a paltry yellow glow formed in the middle of the remaining blackness.

"You... came back..."

'Finally... we're together again.'

Oh... That was it... It was her... Joy... *She* was the reason for Riley's ability to keep going when things got tough. She'd... She'd forgotten that somewhere along the way. Somewhere between making sure she didn't try to stop another emotion from doing their job and the stress of the Loops, Joy had forgotten her own purpose in guiding Riley.

Joy felt a laugh from somewhere within, bringing with it a familiar warmth that spread and chased away the weakness in her body like the dawn chases away the shadows.

"Ha..."

And as it did, the yellow glow on the memory orb around her hand grew, eating away at the blackness until there was none left, and Joy watched the five colors swirl around each other faster and faster...

"Hahahahaha!"

The four emotions watched Slenderman freeze in his taunting as the laugh echoed through headquarters and a bright glow shone from behind the possessed console. A glow that began to move.

"Is that...?" Disgust seemed to perk up and regain a bit of color from her nearly gray state first.

It couldn't be...

Slenderman turned around as a glowing yellow figure stepped out from behind the console, carrying a brightly shining memory orb so prismatic it seemed perfectly clear.

"JOY!" Sadness had never sounded so relieved to see anything.

He'd taken care of her!

"You certainly gave it a good shot," Joy smirked back at the memetic abomination, twirling the core memory on one of her fingers like it was a basketball. "But, come on! I'm *Joy* ! It doesn't matter how hard you knock me down, I'll get right back up! The prospect of being erased forever couldn't keep me down. What makes you think you can?"

Dr. Light had half-dragged his children over near Riley and was assessing the damage done to them. Nothing unrepairable, but rather severe nevertheless. He got to work as the concerned Andersens joined him, alternating their gazes between their pained daughter and the display showing the inside of her mind.

"All right!" Anger pounded his fist to his palm. "We've got the whole gang now! Let's do th–"

"Nope!" Joy cut him off.

The other four emotions blinked in shock, and even the Slenderman seemed surprised.

"I've got Slendy here," Joy told them confidently, stepping out towards the eldritch personage, tossing the core memory to herself as she did. "You all have more important things to do. Fear, get control of the co–"

No less than four shadowy tendrils lashed out at Joy suddenly, and vanished in a flash of yellow light an instant later, the last couple of feet of each burned away, leaving the severed ends a yellow color. Joy held the core memory protectively, one palm held out to ward off the sudden attack.

"–nsole back," Joy continued, her gaze firm and set. "Ang–"

The Slenderman charged himself this time, slapping the shorter emotion's defending arm away and grabbing her by the throat with one hand and the core memory with the other.

The shadowed blackness from before burned at the brilliant prismatic memory–

"Joy! I'm–

"No! Ideas!"

–before Joy slammed two glowing feet into Slenderman's torso with a flash of light.

"Wha...?" Anger blinked, half stunned by the request, and half stunned by the fact that the Slenderman seemed to have been blown in half.

"Well..." Joy chuckled nervously as the brilliance of the core memory erased the blackness the Slenderman had reintroduced. "That was easy?"

Oh, is that what she thought?

Both halves of the Slenderman charged at her independent of each other, lashing out with thin limbs and shadowy tendrils, trying to claim the core memory back from her. One strike got lucky and slammed Joy into the wall hard enough that she lost her grip on the core memory. Before he could grab it though, Joy kicked it hard

across Headquarters to where Sadness and Disgust stood. Sadness, being the closer one to where it was going, caught it.

"You two!" Joy called out, having dove onto Slenderman's top half while the two pieces rejoined and was holding her hands firmly over where the faceless entity's eyes should have been. "Get that memory back in place! Anger!"

"Do you remember what happened the last time I gave Riley an idea?! Never again! I'll help you fight! I can help you beat him!"

"We don't need him beaten!" Joy yelled back as the Slenderman threw her off and slammed her into the floor. "We need him out of Riley's head!"

Joy was then thrown into the ceiling with enough force to bounce her back towards the floor.

"Do you think *any* idea–" Joy called out before being slammed into the wall again, "–can do that if it's not angry?!"

Anger stared, hating to admit that Joy was right. Gritting his teeth, he made to charge at the idea bulb bins, only to watch as shadowy tendrils from Slenderman tore into the wall surrounding the bins and ripped it apart, scattering debris and idea bulbs all over Headquarters.

'Well... that's a sure sign Joy's on the right track...' Anger admitted to himself as he prepared to try and search every last scattered bulb to find one that might do the trick.

"Ow!" Fear yelped and grabbed his hand back from the sparking idea bulb stuck in the console. He'd never seen an idea go that bad... ever. "This... this is a bad idea... Ow! This is a *really* bad idea..."

He looked over the console, trying to figure out how to regain control. This was entirely different than when Sadness had done in baseline. Then, the console had just locked them all out. Now, all the various darkened levers and buttons were moving on their own, driving Riley to do who-knew-what?

Should he grab that lever? Or maybe that one? No! It wouldn't work! None of them would work!

'Okay, breathe...' he told himself. *'This is no time to panic...'*

It was like a final piece of the puzzle had clicked into place, and Fear found his gaze drawn towards the panic button at his usual seat.

"Or maybe... it's the *perfect* time to panic!"

He dashed over, and tripped as something grabbed one of his legs and tried to pull him away. Fear didn't need to look to know it was one of Slenderman's shadowy tendrils. All he needed was to get to that button!

Fueled by a depth of desperation he didn't recall experiencing before, Fear gripped at the console with claw-like hands and began dragging himself inch-by-precious-inch towards Riley's salvation as he kicked at the thing trying to pull him away.

"You... won't... stop... me... from... keeping... Riley... safe!"

He slammed his hand down on the panic button with all his might, causing a wave of purple to flash out lightning-quick from the button and spread all over the console, stopping the possessed movement of levers and buttons, and also ejecting the idea with enough force that it shattered on the Headquarters ceiling.

"AAAAAHHHHH!" Riley's eyes shot fully open and darted around her immediate vicinity. She saw her parents, a damaged Rock and Roll, and Dr. Light trying to repair them. She also felt a terrible, long

overdue, and very built-up panic and began struggling with the straps holding her to the chair.

"No, Riley! Not yet!"

Riley halted her struggles as she heard the familiar voice and listened to it.

'Fear?' she thought back, feeling like her mind had been put through a blender. But she was *feeling* .

"I'm here, Riley. We're all here. Listen, Joy's got a plan, but you need to stay where you are right now."

Sadness and Disgust raced towards the core memory holder, Sadness holding the core memory in her hands like the most precious thing in the world while Disgust covered her by blasting those revolting black tendril things with flower-shaped bursts of green light from her feet.

They reached the core memory holder with little issue, and found a problem. The tendrils choking the life out of the device had closed up over the very slot they needed to place the core memory in.

"No..." Sadness sniffled. "It's... it's not fair... He can't..."

"Keep it together Sadness," Disgust snapped, fending off another attack from behind before kicking the blockage in a flash of green. And what a sloppy kick it was, much like the fight with Slenderman earlier. First chance they got, they were talking Riley into martial arts lessons. (33)

The green light dissolved away at the blockage of tendrils, but they began writhing and reorganizing themselves to prevent access.

"They're being so mean!" Sadness wailed, thrusting one of her arms out at the mass. There was a bolt of blue, a muffled rumble of

thunder, and a cloud formed directly over the foul things, turning parts of them blue and making them writhe in apparent pain. Disgust took that invitation to kick them again and between the blue and the green glows, the blockage swiftly dissolved, allowing Sadness to push the core memory back into place.

There was a pulse of light from it that caused the remaining tendrils grasping at the core memory holder to writhe, and the core memories they were suppressing to flare back to full brilliance. Another pulse and the tendrils were blasted apart completely. The third pulse traveled down the powering connections for the Islands of Personality and there was a great cracking in the distance. Sadness and Disgust turned to watch as the giant statue of Slenderman began to crumble, and then shatter completely as the Islands of Personality were reformed in its place. In fact, they looked brighter than ever, with bridges leading to them even more elaborate than before.

"Did... Did Unity Island just get bigger?" Sadness wondered.

'Okay...' Riley felt a few tears of relief pour from her eyes as something in her head that had been broken was suddenly put right. She... she felt... like herself again...

Anger frantically searched through the scattered idea bulbs for something that could be used to kick the Slenderman out of Riley's head, but was so far finding nothing. Each failure he tossed aside before grabbing for another.

Make a volcano? No. *Toss*

Swim to Hawaii? With their idea of pizza? *Toss*

Drive dad's car? Not if they wanted to live to see sixteen. *Toss*

Go back to Mon– "Gah!" *Big toss*

Look up Pole Dancing on the internet because mom changed the subject way too fast? Yeah, right. (34) *Toss*

Get clarification on 'The Talk'? Ugh, that had been bad enough the first time! *Toss*

Bring emotions outside my head? Not lik–

Anger froze halfway through tossing the idea and took a second look. Yes, it was the same idea that had gotten them into this mess in the first place. And maybe...

Anger grinned and began running for the console.

Just maybe it could get them out of it as well.

"Joy!" he called out as he dashed for the console. "Get him under the tube!"

"Roger that!" Joy called back from where she was dueling the Slenderman before being knocked to the floor.

Anger ignored his desire to go pound the guy in favor of delivering the idea.

Joy, for her part, didn't let being flat on her back stop her. She pulled her legs back and kicked straight out to where, on any normal male, a very vulnerable part would be. A flash of yellow light sent Slenderman staggering, but little more. It was still enough for Joy to spring to her feet and launch a punch at the memetic abomination's lack of face, resulting in the brightest flash of yellow light yet.

A wordless curse echoed across Headquarters as the Slenderman stumbled back from the blow, before he was hit by another, and another, driven back by each until–

"Hey, Slendy!" Anger yelled from the console, before inserting the idea bulb. "GET OUT OF OUR HEAD!"

The Slenderman looked up at the extraction tube directly over him and lashed out with

his tendrils to hold himself in place as he was drawn upwards. Another lashed out to wrap around Joy and pull her towards him.

If he was going to be kicked out, she would come with him. Let them both spend their exile together while Riley learned what a life without happiness was lik–

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF HER!" the yell heralded a kick, followed by a flash of green that dissolved both the tendril holding Joy and those holding the tube, allowing the Slenderman to be drawn up, and out before the tube shut off.

At the console, Anger grinned as he removed the idea bulb, and then kissed it. "Now that's a good idea!"

"Thanks Disgust," Joy smiled.

"Duh," Disgust rolled her eyes and smirked. "You needed my help. Now, let's get Riley back to normal. This place is a mess."

"Sounds good," Joy smiled back. "Okay everyone, listen up!"

Mr. and Mrs. Andersen sighed in relief when the Slenderman had been kicked out. Their daughter was safe again. That monster would never–

The sound of machinery caught their attention and the two looked over where the very last of the generic robot frames lay as it jerked and changed shape. The torso and limbs became unnaturally thin and stretched out as they scorched to the black of the void. The head became squashed, ovular, sheet-white, and completely devoid of facial features.

The Slender Man stood shakily and turned its eyeless gaze towards them.

Very well. They wanted to do it the hard way? Then the hard way it was.

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"Oh my god... Not again..." her Fear murmured.

"Why... why can't that thing just leave Riley alone already?!" her Anger spat.

"He's not getting her," the woman's Sadness declared, getting nods from the other four. "He's not hurting our family if we have anything to say about it."

The display of Mrs. Andersen's sight turned to see the family's newest friend, Dr. Light, working hurriedly to repair his own children.

"Not ours, and not his either."

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"Gentlemen," Mr. Andersen's Anger stated with more calm than he had any right to, "that *thing* hurt Riley. We are officially at Defcon 1." (35)

As one, and without argument, Mr. Andersen's other four emotions produced safety keys and inserted them into their relevant key slots in the console before them.

"Physical violence aversions down, sir," Mr. Andersen's Sadness saluted.

"Fight or Flight reactions set to 'Fight' position," his Fear reported as the man's console reconfigured itself for combat.

"Papa Wolf protocols are now in full effect," his Disgust intoned seriously.

"Hockey stick spotted, we are now armed," his Joy noted.

"Gentlemen," Mr. Andersen's Anger gripped the combat controls before him while the others did the same, "let's give him hell."

The Real World

"AAAAAAAAA–" Mr. Andersen charged at the thing that had caused his daughter do much suffering, hockey stick raised high.

The Slender Man watched him come, seemingly unconcerned, and when the man was a few feet away, the abomination-in-a-robot made its move...

"–AAAAAAA–"

...and nearly fell over.

"–AAAHHHHHHHHH!" Mr. Andersen's attack suffered no such clumsiness and collided hard with Slender Man's head, snapping it back hard enough from a forward-bent position that the eldritch machine nearly fell over backwards.

Mr. Andersen didn't stop with that one success though. He swung again, hitting the Slender Man across his lack of face, kicking him in his spaghetti-thin chest, smashing him across the nearly non-existent shoulder, jabbing him in the non-face, bludgeoning him in the side so hard he thought the thing might split in two, grabbing an arm as it tried to retaliate and twisting it viciously before striking the thing across the head again–

"Holy crap..." Fear stared at the sight that pinned Riley's attention.

"Woo! Go dad!" Anger cheered.

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"Two minutes for slicing!" the man's Joy jeered at the sight. "Two minutes for hooking!"

The Slender Man went down as his feet were pulled out from under him.

"And let's not forget our personal favorite," the man's Anger gave an evil grin and drew back a pair of levers. "Two minutes for HIGH STICKING!"

The Real World

–and stared as the Slender Man caught it in his spindly little hand.

Right... Limbs limited to physically possible movement... How droll.

A foot so thin it was nearly a javelin buried itself in Mr. Andersen's stomach, doubling him over as the Slender Man pulled the man across his downed form and stood in one smooth movement. He grabbed the man's punching arm with one hand, twisted it almost to breaking, and raised the other hand, extended two fingers–

Look at me.

–and waited for the man's eyes to stare at him in horrified realization.

Mr. Andersen's Headquarters

"Bracing positions!" the man's Fear yelled. "We're about to lose the eyes!"

The Real World

I am the last thing you will ever se–

Crack!

The Slender Man staggered from a blow to the back of his head.

Mrs. Andersen's Headquarters

"Get... your... hands... off... my/our... husband!" Mrs. Andersen's Sadness voiced in perfect time with the woman herself as she held a hockey stick of her own across the Slender Man's throat and pulled back with all her might.

"MESS WITH MAMA BEAR'S FAMILY AND PAY THE PRICE!" the woman's Anger screamed.

The Real World

The Slender Man grabbed the stick restraining his head with both hands and snapped it before whipping around, intending to split the woman's face with his bare han–

His strike flew wide as he took a blow to the back of a knee from Mr. Andersen, leaving him open to a blow from Mrs. Andersen's broken improvised weapon.

"Mom?" Sadness voiced to the stunned silence of Headquarters.

"Joy..." Disgust wondered as they all watched Riley's parents take on an eldritch abomination with nothing but a pair of hockey sticks, one of them broken, "when exactly did our parents become awesome?"

"Dad... we can finish this ourselves. We just need a few more seconds."

"Yeah, go help them."

"But..."

"Go!"

That was enough.

Two void-black energy tendrils suddenly sprouted from the Slender Man's back and whipped at the surprised Andersens, wrapping around their throats.

Now–

The Slender Man's body flipped upside down so suddenly that the energy matrix maintaining his tendrils was disrupted, and in the next instant he was blasted forwards past the two as if shot from a cannon. The Andersens stared at the older and more heavyset Dr. Light, his arms extended in a double lunging palm strike where the Slender Man had just been.

Ah... The good doctor... We simply must stop meeting like this.

"Bill, Jill," Dr. Light called to the Andersens as the Slender Man stood back up slowly and deliberately, "get back to Riley."

"But..."

Yes, it didn't matter where they went or what they did. It would all end the same way.

"Don't worry," a younger voice called out, prompting the two to look to where Rock was stepping forwards while supporting his sister Roll and finishing a last-second adjustment, "we've got this."

Did they now?

"Oh, man, this totally needs some awesome music," Joy grinned widely. "Something fast... upbeat..."

"Something..." Riley agreed, thinking on what her emotions had told her that the Light twins had said about the Slenderman, as well as a few things that had happened to them on the way to save her. As

she did, an idea bulb that had rolled near the console lit up. "...that shows we believe in them."

Joy blinked and picked up the lit bulb, before smiling brightly.

"I think this is a *great* idea!" she declared and slotted it into the currently empty socket. "Anger, go pick a few things out of my stash of instruments that you all rifle through all the time while thinking I never notice! Disgust, we're going to need some makeup–"

Dr. Light stood there, hands outstretched in the same position he'd ended his strike in, staring at the Slender Man and trying to control his trembling.

You always made such a good Jekyll, Doctor.

No matter how much he wished he didn't, he remembered the circumstances of his first meeting with the memetic abomination with crystal clarity. (36)

I much preferred you as Hyde though.

Dr. Light clenched his eyes shut at the images that assaulted him, fresh as ever.

Oh, the leg bones stretch gro~tesquely, and the arm bones snap quite lo~udly. The skull bone squeezes the ra~ge glands, and the jaw bone howls with a pai~ned cry. Then you glare with hate at your lov~ed ones, while your claw bones rip through your chi~ld's flesh–

"Dad," a hand dropped on his shoulder, and the man looked to see his two robotic children gazing at him with understanding.

"I'm sorry..." Dr. Light lowered his shaking hands.

"It's okay," Rock smiled.

"Like we said, we've got this," Roll added.

Then perhaps they should stop talking and bring it.

"Hey, mom?" Riley asked as he parents joined her again, looking prepared to get her out of the chair as fast as possible, and preferably as far away from the current room as they could run. "I know you probably want me to get out of here asap, but there's something I still need to do to help Rock and Roll. And I need you to press that red button there so I can do it."

Her parents looked confused, and more than a bit frightened, but they didn't immediately try to grab her out of the chair.

"But...?" her father managed to ask a whole field of questions with one word.

"That Slenderman thing... runs on belief, right? Well... I can maybe give them a boost... I just need to go inside my head and perform an epic song number with my emotions and I realize that makes no sense, but I promise I can explain later. Just... trust me for right now? Please?"

Her parents exchanged glances, before nodding to each other.

"Of course, honey," her mom leaned in and gave her a hug before her dad pressed the button that activated the original function of the Mind Machine and sent her inside her own head.

Rock and Roll charged, forming their arms into mediums for the emotional weapons. Slender Man formed two black-energy tendrils from his back and prepared to defend.

The first shot of the Joyous Sunburst from Rock was blocked by one of the tendrils, which promptly disintegrated in a flash of yellow light and a soundless scream from Slender Man himself. Roll's shot of Angry Flame tore straight through the other tendril, blasted through

Slender Man's frame, and elicited another cry as the eldritch robot bent over double.

The two proceeded to unload everything they had on the Slender Man from where they stood. Joyous Sunbursts, Blooming Disgusts, Angry Flames, Sad Rainclouds, Frantic Frights, and even what they had left of their Zen Busters were fired one after the other at the pained Slender Man, who convulsed and screamed soundlessly with each hit until–

click

click

They were out already?

The Slender Man froze in his pained position before slowly, deliberately, straightening up to show his completely unmarked body (37) and pointed one hand at the stunned Light twins. His fingers spun and rearranged themselves into a bizarre five-pronged Jacob's ladder that began forming an orb of black energy in its center.

His turn then...

The black bolt shot, not at either of the Light twins, but at Riley, prompting Rock to jump in the way with both arms crossed defensively. The shot struck and a wave of monochrome grayness spread over a shocked Rock Light, who stood there unsteadily for a few moments before collapsing listlessly to the floor.

Heh... So predictable.

Dr. Light felt his blood run cold as he saw his son drop to the floor and looked around for something he could use to maybe help turn the tide. His gaze fell on the downed biker robot from earlier.

That would do.

All he needed was a minute and some luck.

"Okay, now the lyrics are going to go like–" Riley began while Disgust flitted around getting all of the emotions into costume, only to be cut off as Sadness tugged on her shirt.

"Um..." Sadness held up the Mind Reader, the headline declaring **'WE BELIEVE!'** before opening it up to reveal the interior to be sheet music complete with lyrics. "Are these them?"

"Er..." Riley blinked in complete surprise. "Yes... That's them exactly."

Roll cursed her stupidity as she blocked a follow-up shot with a sweep of her broom, the inanimate object proving unaffected by Slender Man's weapon and incapable of transmitting it to her.

They should have known that would happen. The emotional weapons were all essentially variants of the Zen Buster; non-lethal, non-damaging shots that only affected the target's emotional state. And the Slender Man had already shown that he could take bursts straight from the emotions themselves without lasting effects. With a physical body buffering him?

They'd been wasting their time. Yes, indeed.

The soundless empty echo of her opponent's laughter grated on Roll's nerves and she charged, broom swinging to dispel another shot of... whatever it was. Screw it all, she was using the facts of his new physical body and pounding the bastard into tiny piles of scrap! Just like she and Rock should have done in the first place!

Such anger... Such all-consuming rage...

Roll swung at the Slender Man's head, and found her broom caught fast by a black energy tendril.

Why... she was like a yipping puppy... More ferocious than dangerous.

The tendril wrapped around the broom and tightened as Roll tried to pull it free. And then the broom shattered.

Roll blinked in shock for half a moment before recovering enough to throw the broken handle at Slender Man's head, only for him to bat it away easily as a second black energy tendril wrapped around Roll's neck and hauled her up to what would be eye level if her opponent had eyes.

So rude she was... Didn't she want his weapon?

"Huh...?"

That was what the two of them did, correct? Take the weapons of their enemies and defeat them with their own abilities? Or those of their comrades? Well, he had one of his own this time. Thanks to their own efforts even. It only seemed fair that they should have it as well. All she needed to do was reach out and take it. She was certainly close enough for it.

"Nnnngh..."

One touch, and The Void Stares Back would be all hers. He was quite fond of the weapon they'd helped give him. So much that he'd decided to name it. She should take it for her own and think of him every time she used it. Think of him and how glorious his power was as she inflicted it on others and fell to its sway in turn. Why, her brother already seemed to enjoy it.

"Do... not... want..." Roll ground out through clenched teeth and a vocal processor strained from pressure on her neck as she struggled to break free.

Disappointing...

The Slender Man formed the five-pointed Jacob's ladder with his hand again and a black orb formed in it as he pressed the weapon to Roll's chest and fired.

But refusal had never been an option.

Mr. and Mrs. Andersen held their place directly in front of Riley as the Slender Man dropped a grayed-out Roll to the floor and began advancing on them. It would only get their daughter over their–

They didn't need to worry. Their precious daughter would come to no harm. Why, there was every chance that she couldn't currently be affected by his weapon at all. So, no, he would do nothing to her. She would remain untouched and unsullied from this point forwards. The only person in the whole world to be so.

The Slender Man's arm formed into the five-point jacob's ladder and aimed it directly at them.

Wouldn't that be something? To be the only sane person left in the world as everyone, from strangers to friends to her own family descended into the depths of madness? Left to watch as a tool invented by her dear friends for strictly peaceful purposes was twisted into the cause for global ruin? Left with the understanding that she was part of the reason why such a horror was even possible? Why...

The black orb formed, and Riley's parents closed ranks to shield their daughter.

...it could cause her to sna–

Pnyow!

The Slender Man's hand-weapon was knocked off-target in a flash of light. He turned his faceless head towards the source of the blast and saw Dr. Light standing with a barrel-shaped device strapped

over one arm, smoking from the plasma bolt it had fired even as the good doctor shook where he stood.

Well, well... It seemed like Jekyll wanted to play after all. Now...

The Slender Man batted aside three shots from Dr. Light with black energy tendrils from his back.

...how long until Hyde came out? Hmm?

Dr. Light fired again and again as the Slender Man strode leisurely up to him, batting aside the plasma blasts with his black energy tendrils.

How long until his sins overwhelmed him? How long until the weight of guilt for what he'd created became too much to bear? How long until the man who preached peace admitted that his efforts only fueled war? How long until he realized that his precious creations were all failures? How long until he admitted that for all his genius... for all his virtue... for all his effort... for all his good intentions... he was the worst monster of them all?

"I..."

He needed to face facts. The future he had strived to build with his own two hands was a blight upon creation. A foul festering–gloriously so!–abomination that poisoned all caught in its current. He had built the foundation of the future, invented the technology that enabled the horrors that filled it. He was to blame for everyone killed with his inventions. He was to blame for every inch of destruction his creations and their derivatives wrought.

"No... I..." Dr. Light had stopped firing, his arm drooping and his entire body trembling as he stared at the advancing Slender Man. When a black energy tendril reached out to take the makeshift buster on his arm, he couldn't find it in himself to resist.

The likes of Wily, Sigma, and the rest were never the true villains. It had always been only–

"You're not seriously listening to that, are you?" a voice cut across the room, prompting Dr. Light to look up at the screen displaying the inside of Riley's head...

...and did a double-take as he saw Riley and her five emotions decked out like a heavy metal band.

"You? A bad guy?" Riley scoffed. "That's a load of bulls–"

"RILEY!" the girl's mother shouted, causing all six figures to flinch in changrin.

"Sorry mom," Riley apologized. "But still! You're one of the best people I know! Rock and Roll wouldn't be such amazing friends if you weren't a good person too! That's what I believe!"

The Slender Man turned to consider the image above as he idly crushed Dr. Light's improvised weapon.

Was that so? That is what she believed? In the face of all the destruction made possible by this man's so-called 'genius', she believed that?

"Yeah!" Riley shouted back. "And you want to know what else we believe? Then listen up!"

A power chord rang out and the music began. (38)

ERROR: MASTER WEAPON THE VOID STARES BACK ADVERSELY AFFECTING SYSTEMS

EMOTIONAL PROCESSOR OVERLOADED: SYSTEMS UNRESPONSIVE

MASTER WEAPON THE VOID STARES BACK LABELED MALWARE

ATTEMPTING TO DELETE

WARNING: MALWARE CANNOT BE DELETED

ATTEMPTING TO QUARANTINE

WARNING: MALWARE CANNOT BE QUARANTINED

ATTEMPTING TO FIX DAMAGED SYSTEMS

WARNING: MALWARE DAMAGE BEING INFLICTED FASTER THAN SYSTEMS CAN CORRECT

SYSTEM RESTORATION PROGRESS: NEGATIVE

"We pledge allegiance to the faith,"

"of everyone who rolls and rocks!"

UNKNOWN ENERGY ACTIVITY DETECTED

RESUMING INTEGRATION

"And to that greatest hope for which they stand!"

"Two heroes under heaven!"

UNKNOWN ENERGY INTERFERING WITH MALWARE

"Oh, even gods love Rock and Roll!"

SYSTEM RESTORATION PROGRESS: POSITIVE

"Bring liberty and justice to all lands!"

REATTEMPTING MALWARE PURGE

"Repeating Time,"

"It tries us hard."

UNKNOWN ENERGY INTEGRATION SUCCESSFUL

"When every Loop,"

"we're dealt the cards."

ENHANCEMENT MODE INITIALIZING

"And every fight,"

"we're told exactly how we'll lose!"

MALWARE PURGE SUCCESSFUL

"But when we,"

"all lose control:"

EMOTIONAL PROCESSING RESTORED TO NORMAL

"We believe,"

"in Rock and Roll."

"Sis?" Rock sat up shakily, rubbing his head. "What...?"

"In the end,"

"They're gonna help to see us through!"

"I don–" Roll began before black energy tendrils slammed into both of the Light twins and flung them towards the wall. They flipped in midair, effectively on instinct, and hit the wall in mirroring foot-first crouches.

Blinking, they looked at each other to see their sibling encased in a shimmering rainbow glow all over.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

SONG MODE ACTIVATED

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

"I think we just got a new toy," Roll grinned as they both leapt over a second strike from the Slender Man in unison.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

"Then let's put it to good use!" Rock grinned back as the two charged the Slender Man.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

SYSTEM STABILITY AT 100% AND RISING

SYSTEM CAPACITY AT 100% AND RISING

SELF REPAIR SYSTEMS RUNNING AT 1000%

"Do you trust these heroes,"

The Slender Man sent out his tendrils again–

"to save you from the curse?"

–only for the rainbow auras of Rock and Roll combined with mirrored kicks to carve through them like wet tissue paper.

"To take on quests of action and of stealth?"

The Slender Man hastily formed both arms into the five-pronged Jacob's ladder that was his weapon–

"Calamity and ruin,"

–and fired black orbs at them–

"they take it all in stride,"

–which Rock and Roll mirror-punched into nothingness with ease.

"and stare into the face of doom itself!"

The Slender Man let out a soundless cry and formed two very large black energy tendrils to bring smashing in from either side of the glowing Light twins.

"Repeating Time,"

With mirrored arm-blocks, Rock and Roll shattered the tendrils and leapt for the Slender Man.

"It tries us hard."

"When every Loop,"

They launched into twin kicks–

"we're dealt the cards."

"And every fight,"

That the Slender Man caught in each hand with significant effort, being pushed back by the force.

"we're told exactly how we'll lose!"

"But when we,"

The Slender Man pushed back, sending the Light twins into opposing spins–

"all lose control:"

"We believe,"

–that they turned into mirrored spinning kicks to his torso–

"in Rock and Roll."

"In the end,"

–followed by identically mirrored punches to the face–

"They're gonna help to see us through!"

–that launched him backwards.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

The Slender Man caught himself in a one-handstand and sprung back from a follow-up diving kick–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

–forming both hands into his weapon, aiming them at each other–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

–and unleashing a shadowy shockwave–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

–that broke upon Rock and Roll's rainbow auras, but also forced them back. The Slender Man then began charging up a massive ball of blackness between his weapons.

As he did, Riley began to speak as her emotions continued playing the music.

"Would that my cries were heard in the heavens. Would that they were inscribed upon the sky. As I was clutched in an iron fist of shadow and feared that I would be lost in the dark forever."

Seeing it, Rock and Roll stepped together until their rainbow auras were touching before stepping apart, with wisps of their auras stretching between them almost like a net right as the Slender Man fired.

"But I have learned that heroism lives!"

Rock and Roll braced their aura net like they were catching a boulder...

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

...and it held.

"I see now that it will stand forth and win the day against the ruin and the madness."

And as it held, the wispy net began attacking the giant orb of blackness–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

"Even for those who trust them not, they shall strike down the wicked,"

–slowly converting it into a massive rainbow orb instead.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

"and raise the flag of justice for all to see."

And the Slender Man stared in disbelief–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

"And this is forever why–"

–as they threw it right back at him.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

He reached out both his hands and black energy tendrils to catch it like they did–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

–only for the tendrils to burn away and his hands to prove no impediment.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

The Slender Man was engulfed in the massive rainbow orb for several moments–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

–before being released, his mechanical body smoking and smoldering.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

Only to meet twin charging punches to the chest that stunned him–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

–followed by two roundhouse kicks from either direction to the neck–

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

–that popped his head clean off.

"We believe in Rock and Roll!"

Roll pushed the decapitated machine to the side while Rock held out one hand to catch the head and formed the other into a screwdriver. (39)

"So... that's...?" the emotions heard through Riley's senses as they made plans for cleaning up Headquarters. There was so much to do. In addition to the huge mess that needed cleaning after Slenderman's occupation of Riley's head and the ensuing fight, there were all sorts of memory orbs that they all needed to convert to one or more emotions before sending to long term. And that wasn't even mentioning all the damage done to Riley's extended mindscape that would take a long time to put right. But put it right they would. For now, Riley was planning on finding the couch and laying down for a while once she got home so as to not need any of her emotions at the console, thus freeing them to clean up Headquarters. (40)

At the moment, Riley was leaning on her parents for emotional support and fiddling with a hockey puck she'd picked up off the floor while Rock and Roll presented a disturbingly black chip to everyone.

"Yeah," Rock's voice was heard. "That's Slender Man's IC chip."

"He's trapped there, completely unable to hurt anyone so long as we don't plug it into anything," Roll's voice added.

"That's good," Joy sighed in relief and leaned back in her chair. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm all for locking him up and getting on with our life. Whaddya say?"

"Um..." Sadness started, looking a bit uncomfortable. "Well..."

"What Sadness is trying to say is that you've been outvoted Joy," Disgust cut in.

"Huh?" Joy blinked in confusion.

"He really hurt Riley with what he did," Sadness pointed out.

"As long as that chip exists, someone could possibly send Slenderman back in here, or give him a new body, and we can't let that happen," Fear looked as determined as Joy had ever seen him.

"Um, I'm not sure that's–"

"GET HIM!" Anger yelled suddenly and all of the emotions save a confused Joy hit their controls at the same time.

"So long as–" Rock began, only to be interrupted as a tired Riley suddenly lunged forwards, swinging the hockey puck she held like a bludgeon.

"AAAAAAHHH!" She screamed, smashing the sport supply onto the chip over and over again, reducing the delicate piece of technology to pieces, and then smashing the pieces to smaller pieces, and smashing those smaller pieces until they resembled dust more than anything else. After nearly a minute of fury where everyone else could only watch in stunned shock, Riley collapsed weeping into her mother's arms. Her father joined the comforting motion.

"–no one breaks it, he can't escape," Rock sighed with resigned understanding. "Being of pure thought, remember? He doesn't need a physical form to survive."

Riley froze in her post traumatic sobbing at that and looked at Rock with weary horror.

"I was trying *to tell you all..."* Joy snapped inside her head.

"...oops."

"It's fine," Roll waved her apology off. "I was having trouble stopping myself from doing the same thing."

"Besides," Dr. Light began, "there are other beings similar to him. Others that will be as unhappy about his actions as we are and are

in a better position to do something about it. We are not likely to see him again for a long time."

"You're certain about that?" Mr. Andersen asked.

"Quite," Dr. Light told the man. "I believe we all owe you a much more thorough explanation of things than we've been able to give so far. But for now, I believe it best that we all rest and recover from today's ordeals. Now... if I can just figure out where Auto got to during all of this and whether or not he can drive a vacuum cleaner..."

It was a lot for the Andersens to take in. Their daughter was caught in a time loop like that Groundhog Day movie? It was overseen by gods from ancient (and even modern) mythology? Some of them, like the Slenderman, liked to torment 'loopers' for fun? There was no known way for it to end? There were countless other universes that were undergoing the same thing (and Dr. Light's was one of them)? The very existence of their reality hinged on Riley's well-being? Riley had five voices inside her head that supposedly represented her emotions?

That last one should have probably been a great deal more disturbing to them than it was.

"One question Doctor..." Mr. Andersen finally spoke up. "How many times have you had to explain this to us?"

"Me personally? To you specifically?" the doctor raised an eyebrow. "This is my first time. Though I suspect your daughter's explained it a few times already. She seemed rather confident that you would take it well after all."

"I see..." Mrs. Andersen paused. "And... we might begin 'looping' as well?"

"Perhaps," Dr. Light nodded. "Or perhaps by some convergence of odd circumstances you may simply begin Dreaming of past Loops. Or, even more rarely, a combination of both like I have."

"Of... of course," Mr. Andersen nodded. "Well... at least Riley now knows it's too dangerous to go messing with the contents of her head, right?"

"Oh, sure," Dr. Light smirked in amusement. "Much like humanity has long since learned that it is dangerous to play with fire. Or to ride in wheeled vehicles. Or to cross the oceans in boats. Or to fly higher than the birds. Or to go into space." (41)

"But–"

"Mrs. Andersen, please understand that the single greatest threat to a looper's mental health is boredom. The best remedy for this is experimentation, novelty, uniqueness, and new ideas. Riley's idea to bring her emotions outside her head is not one that I foresee being easily discarded. She may set it aside for a time after this event, but I have no doubt that she will return to the concept eventually. Perhaps in a Loop with far fewer safeguards against disaster than we can provide. We can teach her proper experimental procedures and safety precautions to lessen potential disaster, as well as how to take such things slowly. A lesson we ourselves could perhaps use a refresher in."

The Andersens looked at each other, uncertain.

"I'd say we could also teach her the value of never giving up, but I do believe your daughter already knows that very well."

The Andersens found they had no argument for that.

Riley lay on the bench looking at the clouds and wondering just how long today's cleanup effort was going to take. Not the one at the lab, the one inside her head.

Every day, most of her emotions had taken leave to go out and help with cleanup efforts. It made sense, strictly speaking, but it left Riley herself a bit stunted for the day. Plus, she felt extremely paranoid that the emotions that left to help wouldn't come back. Even though they always did, and promised they always would.

"Riley," Joy had told her, *"It doesn't matter why we leave or how far we go, we'll always come back to you. That's a promise."*

It was the most reassuring and heartwarming thing any of her emotions could have told her. So why was she feeling more paranoid about the concept now than when she'd had the eldritch embodiment of paranoia squatting in her head?

"Maybe because me and Fear stayed behind today?" Sadness suggested.

"Maybe," Riley admitted back, *"but would you two have been the ones to stay behind if I wasn't already inclined to feel this way?"*

It was chicken-and-the-egg complicated. Riley's emotions influenced her behavior, but her need for any particular emotion influenced *their* behavior. It was insanely circular reasoning, but it boiled down to the same thing: They were in this together, for better or worse.

Riley felt the familiar, comforting pulse of Unity Island activating. She'd been drawing on that one a lot in the past couple of days, actually. It helped keep her mind off of... that.

Riley closed her eyes as several memories played in her head unbidden and shuddered.

"Sorry, we'll send those back down immediately," Fear told her quickly.

"It's fine," she sent back. *"Not your f–"*

"Hey," the voice of Rock interrupted her mental conversation and Riley felt the bench shift as something leaned against it from the back. Riley glanced to see her new friend leaning against the back of the bench, facing away from her.

"Hey," she said back, before the two settled into a few minutes of silence.

"You want to talk about it?" Rock finally said. He didn't need to say what 'it' was. They both knew there was only one event he could mean.

Riley spent a couple more minutes of intense internal debate, where her emotions tried to convince her to go through with it and she tried to talk them out of talking her into it.

"Not really," she finally said, much to Sadness and Fear's disappointment.

"Do you mind if I talk about it then?" Rock asked. "Not this one, I mean. The first time I dealt with... *him* ."

Riley blinked in surprise. She hadn't really considered the fact that the Lights had obviously met–

"Hey guys!" Joy's voice called out. *"We're back!"*

"You're early," Fear noted.

"Eh, it felt like a good time to take a break," Joy waved it off.

"Plus, Anger blew up at some of the mind workers," Disgust added. *"He wanted them to dump all the memories from that day and they told him nothing doing. Something about having to dump too many memories already or something."*

"Sorry Riley, I think they sent a few back up here to spite me."

"Also, they sort of told us to get out of their way and stop interfering," Joy added sheepishly. *"Said we weren't really helping... Anyway, what's going on? What's Rock doing here?"*

"He wants to tell us about the time he first met Slenderman," Sadness replied before Riley could say anything.

"Oooo... sounds interesting!" Joy enthused, and Riley felt a sudden surge of intense curiosity.

"Gee, thanks Joy."

"You'll say that with less sarcasm later, I'm sure."

"Okay..." Riley gave in to the desire with a sigh.

And so Rock did. He spun her a tale of a mysterious Halloween night, when robots themed straight out of a horror movie marathon crawled out of the woodwork and plunged the city into madness, terror, and death. A tale where Rock was cut off from all of his friends, family, and allies to be gradually worn down by the cruelty and sadism of his opponents and the people they had infected to turn against him. Where he was forced to fight against his own infected father in a duel to the death, the both of them surviving only due to a timely intervention before their savior was savagely cut down.

"And that's when he finally showed himself," Rock said. "Stepped out and proceeded to prove that I could do nothing to him. He had me broken and beaten in minutes, and I couldn't stop him."

"Did Mega Man save you?" Riley asked. "Like you saved me?"

Rock paused for a moment. "You still haven't figured it out?"

"Figured what ou–" Riley cut off and blinked as it all clicked into place. "Wait... *you're* Mega Man? Does that mean Roll...?"

"She does the 'Mega Woman' bit most Loops," Rock told her, before slipping a photo to Riley.

She took it and looked at the familiar faces of Rock and Roll, only clad in armor and helmets. Rock's was cyan on his torso, upper arms, and upper legs, with bold blue for his lower arms, hands, lower legs, feet, hips (looking like he had a pair of briefs on), and most of his helmet. Roll's was similar, except yellow and cream instead of blue and cyan. The main differences past that were that her helmet apparently had an opening for her ponytail and her chest had additional yellow armor shaped like a sports bra, clearly designating her as female.

"Wow..."

"She's the one who saved me that Loop," Rock continued. "She saw how bad the fight was going, compared with what the internet had on Slenderman, and figured out his game. Then she commandeered a global broadcast to inspire the whole world into believing I could take him."

"What did she say?"

"A bunch of stuff that I find kind of embarrassing to repeat..." Rock's voice sounded like he was blushing, but Riley couldn't confirm that with him facing away from her. "It's... Do you know what I believe in Riley?"

Riley shook her head, before remembering that Rock couldn't see the gesture.

"I believe in the potential of humanity. I believe in the potential of robots. I believe in the possibility of people that are inherently different to understand each other and get along. To work together for a future greater and brighter than any one person could ever hope to achieve alone. I believe in the ability to stand up no matter how many times life knocks us down, and to keep going no matter what obstacles are put in our way. I believe that we can all stand

together and become strong, that we possess the tools we need to solve any problem we can face. And that even if by some chance we don't, there are others who do that will stand with us to bring about that bright shining future. We may not always agree what that future should be or how to get there, but as long as we have faith in each other, we will get there nonetheless. No matter how long it takes, or how many setbacks we suffer, we will get there."

Riley blinked in astonishment and wondered if this was what finding religion felt like.

"Roll, she... she told everyone in the world that the one who put his faith in them now needed their faith in turn. That the one who had invested in them all of his hopes and dreams, needed theirs invested in him. She... heh... she asked them to believe in the one who believed in them."

Riley blinked at that last line. "Was that a reference to something?"

"Gurenn Lagann," Rock smirked.

"Ah... never read that... or watched it... whatever. What did you do?"

"I took their hopes, their faith, and all their dreams... and I punched the ever-loving daylights out of the Slenderman. One. Two."

Riley snorted in amusement as she watched Rock mime a jab and then an uppercut.

"I... I think he may have held a grudge..."

"Maybe..." Riley admitted somberly.

"I just want you to understand something, Riley," Rock continued. "What you're feeling? What the Slenderman did to you? We've been there. We've felt that. Maybe not exactly the same, but close enough. You are not alone in this."

"It's..." Riley felt the tears come and didn't try to stop them. "He was *in my head* ! Do you know what that's like?! I want to rip open my skull and scrub my brain within an inch of its life, and I don't think it would be enough! The things he was doing in there! The things he told me! The...*sob*"

"The things he wanted you to do for him?" Rock spoke up, and Riley's tears slowed even as her blood froze. "Yeah, he pulled that one on me too. He started with whispers to join him, to give in to the madness 'so we could rule together' to paraphrase. Then he started getting really disturbing..."

"I think at one point he was saying that he wanted to adopt me, or marry me, or adopt and then marry me (or was that the other way around (42))? I dunno *sniff* I was trying real hard not to listen to him. I just... I was so helpless... I could almost feel myself breaking and was sure I'd never be put back together again..."

"And then you kicked him out of your head, sealed him in a physical body, and proceeded to go heavy metal on him."

"That was my emotions..." Riley sniffed, before allowing herself a small smile.

"No, that was all of us."

"Together."

"Period.

"End of discussion."

"Double-taps no take-backs."

"Riley, the last time we fought the Slenderman, it took an entire planet's worth of belief to turn the tide. This time it just took you."

"...a robot body, some magic song powder, and a musical number," Riley added with a half-chuckle.

"Never underestimate the power of a good musical number," Rock grinned.

Riley was surprised to find herself in a fit of giggles at that one.

"So... what's next?" she asked upon getting herself under control.

"Next, after we finish getting the lab back in shape, we try the experiment again," Rock told her, "only smarter."

Riley didn't need to be told what experiment. There was only one that it could be. Bringing her emotions outside her head. Knowing what had happened last time, the idea filled her with dread. But... she still really wanted to find a way to make it work.

"We're here for you Riley, no matter what."

"Soo... what do you mean by smarter?"

"To start with, we're only going to bring one emotion out at a time. Basic frame, no accessories, much less weapons of any kind. We're going to keep them hooked up so the process can be reversed immediately if needed and there will be no walking around outside the lab during the experiment until later stages, and only then if you're certain you'll be fine. With your consent, either Roll or myself will monitor the experiment from inside your head while the other monitors from outside it. We've got a couple of hypothesis about symbiotic connections between you and your emotions, and we want to see if we can possibly isolate that connection and figure out how you can build it up. So we'll be attempting to induce an emotional reaction based on whichever one is outside your head at the time and taking readings."

"How long do you think it'll take?"

"No idea," Rock shook his head. "Our Loop's duration is pretty flexible, and we've never tried something like this before a few days ago, so there's a very good chance this is going to take longer than

the Loop itself. Because of that, we're also going to be focusing on showing you how to perform the experiment on your own in safe, controlled environments. Which, yes, means boring technical explanations that you're going to have to stay awake for and pay attention to."

"Aww... Can't you just use musical numbers like Phineas and Ferb?"

"Hmm... Lab safety procedures in C-minor..."

Riley couldn't help it. The absurdity of the concept hit her like a ton of bricks and she broke down laughing.

"How about this one?" Rock asked before changing the image. A long dramatic gasp sounded, followed by a dull thump.

"And Fear just fainted," Disgust groaned. *"Again."*

"Seriously ugly, and whatever it is could really stand to brush its teeth, but not all that scary," Riley deadpanned, sparing a glance over to where Fear had slumped in his chair.

"Yeah, this isn't working," Roll sighed from her spot in Riley's head, her own body seemingly at rest in a third chair. There had been some debate about which of them would get 'internal' duty, but the deciding factor had been Riley imagining her dad's reaction to a boy being inside her head unsupervised. After all, her parents were perpetually only just getting introduced to the idea that she might be interested in boys, so... yeah. *"Get Rock to download Fear back in and we'll try someone else."*

"Oh! Oh! Me next!" Joy volunteered.

"Roll thinks we should try a different emotion so we don't have to keep waking Fear up," Riley relayed. "Joy's volunteering. And... actually, that reminds me of something I've been meaning to ask

you. You mentioned having a Loop with Phineas and Ferb. What was that like? What were their robot masters like?"

"Oh, man," Rock chuckled as he pressed a few buttons on the modified Mind Machine. "That's probably the perfect thing to ask if we're going to test Joy out. Those guys... They made some of the best robot masters, really. Like the hard-skating roller-coaster riding Roller Man, or the refreshment serving Lemonade Man. Soccer Man X7 and Hockey Man Z9 were pretty fun too..." (43)

"How'd Doofenshmirtz work out?" Riley asked as the robot body Fear was inhabiting rearranged itself to a blank androgynous frame, ready for the next occupant. "Was he replaced by Wily?"

"Nah," Rock shook his head. "Dr. Doofenshmirtz was actually a huge Wily fanboy that Loop and they teamed up a few times. Roll and I often teamed up with Perry to take on one or both of them and strangely neither of them figured out that Mega Man and Mega Woman were actually Rock and Roll despite us not trying to hide it. Neither did anyone else for that matter, except Phineas and Ferb really. And Perry."

Rock pondered that strangeness for a moment as the generic robot body rearranged to create Joy's form before continuing.

"Anyway, there was this one time that Doofenshmirtz decided he wanted to create a robot master of his own rather than his usual -inator and–"

"–So Dr. Wily says 'Norm Man?' and Doofenshmirtz replies 'No, just Norm. The 'Man' thing is your trademark after all I mean, unless you think I *should* ...'"

Joy was so caught up with the giggles that she was barely staying in her seat. Riley on the other hand...

"Enough! Stop!" Riley demanded.

"What's wrong?" Rock looked concerned.

"What's wrong?!" Riley fumed, before getting ahold of herself and taking a deep breath. "Have you ever not gotten a joke that someone else finds hilarious and been really angry about it? Because that's been me for your entire story about Doofenshmirtz and I'm really getting fed up with it! Sorry... I know it's funny, because Joy is cracking up, and I know I should be laughing, but I can't seem to, and it's just ticking me off..."

"Yeah, we thought this might be the case," Roll piped up from inside Riley's head as Rock dutifully began the transfer of Joy back.

"What?!" Anger fumed back. *"Why didn't you say anything?!"*

"Because that's the point of testing," Roll replied in exasperation. *"To see if your assumptions were correct. Why? Are you volunteering to go next?"*

"Hey, Rock, what's the plan for testing if I still feel Anger?" Riley asked.

"Hmm... I think we determined the most effective method would be snapping you with rubber bands."

"WHAT?!" Anger bellowed.

"Bad idea! Really bad idea! A bad snap could draw blood, which might bleed too much and get infected and cause us to die!"

"What?" Roll asked incredulously. *"Do you have any idea what the sheer odds against that are? Eve–"*

"NEVER TELL ME THE ODDS!"

"Yeah... that might not be the best idea at this stage," Riley relayed.

"We thought the same," Rock nodded, "which is why we weren't planning to try Anger until after noticeable results with at least one of

the others. If any of your emotions are going to say 'stop' first, it's probably him."

"Hmm..." Riley pondered her emotions and the roles they served for a moment. "Actually, we should probably start with Disgust."

"Wait, what? Why me?" Disgust wondered.

"Hmm... not a bad choice all things considered," Rock nodded. "The lab's pretty clean by necessity and we weren't planning for you to eat lunch still strapped in, so there's negligible chance that she'd be needed to keep you from making a health mistake. So long as we avoid images that provoke a fear reaction, there shouldn't be too much disruption..."

"I. cannot. believe. that. you. found. nothing. wrong. with. broccoli *!"* Disgust ranted in Riley's head after the day's test. Neither Rock nor Roll had identified any connection that could be made to work over a distance yet, but as they kept reminding her, the whole thing was new territory. They had no more idea of how to solve the problem than she did, really, so it wasn't that surprising.

"Well, it's disgusting and you weren't in my head, so..." Riley shrugged.

"And all those missed snarks! It's like you forgot everything I taught you over the years!"

She had to admit though: Winding up Disgust was amusing. She could see why Joy liked doing it.

"And do not get me started on your fashion sense without me!" Disgust continued ranting. *"That's it. We are figuring out how to remain connected over distance, because there is no way I am going to risk you spending a Loop with fashion sense that bad ever. Not happening!"*

"So?" Roll asked.

"Disgust is ranting so much the others can't get a word in edgewise," Riley answered, "and I am stiff like you would not believe from sitting down, but other than that I think it went pretty well. I just don't want to do it every day..."

"We won't," Rock told her. "We have a few more ideas that don't require the Mind Machine."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Like trying activities and seeing how well you can feel certain emotions while they're away from the console. Think Anger can handle a hockey game without being directly at the controls?"

"WHAT?! That's cruel and unusual punishment!"

"No," Riley smirked, "but I think I can talk him into trying it anyway."

The Slenderman returned to himself in an unfamiliar pace and tried to figure out what had happened. His failsafe for returning him to his hacking workshop had taken far longer to run its course than it should have. It had also returned him to the wrong place.

If one of the other members of Shoggoth-chan had decided to dump him somewhere as a prank, then he was going to–

A message on the terminal screen–an Admin-quality terminal at that–caught his awareness and he turned his attention to it fully.

Normally, I would see my son's failures as his own problem. However, your actions have threatened his successes. Successes which have reflected well on the reputation of the Olympians. Were his triumphs to be undone, it would reflect poorly on that same reputation, and I cannot allow that. Your actions have been brought to his attention and he should be returning to his office presently. I

would suggest you leave before then if you wish all your body parts to remain connected to each other, but the delay in your return I arranged should have made that a moot point. Let this be a lesson to you.

– Zeus

The Slenderman didn't waste any time before bolting. He dove for the door and yanked it open before dashing out...

Wham

...and crashing faceless head-first into a massive bare hairy barrel chest over loud volcano-print swim trunks, and flanked by three very shapely and fit forms in honest-to-Yggdrasil chainmail bikinis. Skimpy ones. All four bodies were very much tanned bronze.

"...I see our beach vacation was *not* interrupted as a prank," Hephaestus's voice rumbled like a volcano about to blow its top. "You have *exactly* three seconds to explain yourself before I break you over my knee and give you to the ladies here for discipline. O–"

The Slenderman didn't even wait for the first number to finish before bolting through a gap between the four figures that was just barely wide enough for his impossibly thin frame to slip through and running for all he was worth.

"OH NO YOU DON'T!" the enraged howls of three Valkyries boomed after him as they gave chase.

Slenderman didn't look back as he ran for everything he was worth. All of the usual advantages he boasted in the mortal realm, even before Ascending, meant *nothing* at this level of existence, making him far too vulnerable for his liking. All the strength he had from belief was offset, matched, exceeded, or even eclipsed by all other beings who existed here. He had no problems messing with the Admins and their precious fragile mortals–enjoyed it immensely in

fact–but that was when he had the benefit of plenty of distance between them. Dealing with them face-to-no face? Not a chance.

And so he ran, the sound of three very angry Valkyries hot on his trail. As well as the rumbling sound of a furious volcano god behind them. He needed to get out of the Admin complex. Escape and find his way back to somewhere they had less influence. Not the Nidhogg complex though. Hild and the other Demons and evil Gods rather had it out for the members of Shoggoth-chan in general, so he was no safer in their neighborhood than he was here.

"Hey! There he is, sis! Just like the Great Apollo said!" the third-person speaking Admin declared at the end of the hall the Slenderman was running down.

"I see him," his sister Artemis drew back an arrow and let fly.

The Slenderman was very thankful for many things about himself. Right then he was thankful that his impossibly thin body was ideal for sidestepping arrows before making a sharp turn down another hall.

"Damnit!" he heard Artemis swear. "Aft–"

"Nah, no need. Not with who's waiting for him that way."

What did that mea–

"Well, look whosh it ish!" the drunken slur of Dionysus boomed from ahead. The oaf would be no trouble to get arou–

The Slenderman then spotted the hovering mass of pasta (with two giant meatballs) behind Dionysus, revised that impression, and veered down another side hall. The Flying Spaghetti Monster was one of his least favorite entities in all of creation–eldritch abominations were not supposed to be lovable and tolerant!–but he had no desire to tangle with it right then. Not with who was chasing him.

"He wentsh thatsh way!"

He ran, tearing past doors before seeing a gathering of females in the distance. The elder Charites, Pandora, some goddess from outside the Olympian pantheon, and...

Athena. Nuts.

He abruptly turned down another side hall, a cold sweat enveloping him as he wondered just what the hell was going on. He needed to lose pursuit and fas–

The sound of jeering from many of the side halls informed him that he was being boxed in. Herded almost. It was not a feeling he liked being on the receiving end of. He tore through the Admin complex, taking each unoccupied hall that he found, twisting and turning until he had no idea where he was anymore and simply wanted to find a way out. And then–

"Hello," a two-faced Admin smiled from the sides of each mouth at the Slenderman from between two doors. The sounds of pursuit were distant, he must have gained ground, but closing in fast.

What did he want?

"Want?" the Admin–Janus, if he recalled correctly–spoke from his single head's left-facing face, tossing a key from one hand to the other before his right-facing face continued. "Why to offer you choice!"

Huh?

"A choice! The kind of choice you never give any of your victims," the two faces alternated speaking. "In this case, which of these two doors to take to escape pursuit. Unless you'd rather just wait here for them."

Get to the point already!

"So impatient! Very well, this key can open either door, but only one. Once open, you must face what is behind the door alone. The door on the right holds a magical girl."

They must think him an idiot. He knew exactly who they meant and he wanted no part of her.

"A wise choice. Yes. Magical girls have such a history with eldritch abominations after all. Oh, the violence they perform on the–"

GET ON WITH IT!

"Such impatience, but very well. The door on the left holds a kitty ca–"

He'd grabbed the key and opened the door before another word could be spoken, slamming it behind him.

"Dear, dear," Janus's left face grinned sinisterly. "He could have waited for us to tell him the rest of it."

"To be fair, we did present the choice as obvious," his right face chuckled.

"Ah, but one should always beware the obvious choice!"

"Thanks for helping us get this set up so fast, Hermes!"

"My pleasure!" the Olympian trickster stepped out from where he'd been hidden.

The Slenderman was confused. The room he'd entered seemed to have no walls that could be seen, and the door had vanished behind him as he entered. What trickery was this?

"Hi there!" a chipper female voice greeted him, and the Slenderman turned and looked downwards to see a common calico housecat dressed like a train stationmaster. "I'm Tama!" (44)

He didn't care. He was–

"The Slenderman!" Tama interrupted, her feline expression still chipper. "I've heard of you. You like tormenting innocent people and driving them insane, right? You wanna know what I like?"

He most certainly did n–

The feline's expression suddenly shifted from chipper to a feral glare.

"I. Like. *Trains* ."

The sound of a steam whistle reached him moments before the front of the train did. (45)

"Sounds like he chose Tama," one of the Palici twins (46) stated with a grin from the archery alcove Janus and Hermes had set up to connect the two rooms. The twin steam gods had been happy to lend one of their steam trains to this little trap of Janus's. Heck, Tama seemed so happy with it, they might let the cat goddess keep it.

"Which I guess means it's your turn, m'lady," his brother gestured to the alcove with a bow.

"Thank you," Madoka Kaname smiled before readying her bow and stepping up to take her shot at whatever Tama had left for her.

AN) I officially lost track of the sheer number of death (or at least severe injury) threats Slenderman got on Spacebattles while writing this fic. I call that a successful villain.

1) Pun, pun, PUN!

2) Apparently a common mistake among the Inside Out fandom.

3) Not the most eloquent first impression there, Riley.

4) Think about what she does most Loops for a second.

5) Known by name as... the Auto-Mobile.

6) Also one of the few polite ways.

7) They were rolling on the floor in hysterics. But then, given the context of what Riley said and what they usually live through, they were just a bit entitled.

8) This is Fear. Well, Mr. Andersen's Fear anyway. Being crazy-prepared is part of the job description.

9) Dr. Light is an idealist, but he's an idealist who's put a lot of thought into this.

10) Specific variations can fall on either side of the equation, or even teeter on the edge.

11) Fear is also ridiculously genre savvy

12) Basically it's a 'calm-down' gun.

13) Plus she'd kind of been reading it way past her bedtime because it was so engrossing despite being specifically told not to by her parents.

14) Oh, come on Joy! Have you learned *nothing* about tempting fate?

15) What's really scary is that she said that with a completely straight face.

16) NiGHTcapD pointed out something interesting shortly after this portion was originally posted on Spacebattles. Namely that Slenderman just literally hacked Riley. He was apparently doing some independent research on the subject at the time and made the following observations:

Vulnerability: emotion, natural Looper willingness to experiment specifically. Along with a break in Heph's and Janus' schedules.

Exploit: make the Emotions leave Riley's head, while apparently they are still tied to it.

Payload: the Man himself.

17) This would be where Zerorock41 decided to try the equivalent of a deus-ex-machina rage-quit. See Bonus Omake 1.

18) With three shots of tequila to top it off.

19) In case anyone was wondering, I took inspiration for their weapons from their respective power-ups in the Inside Out: Thought Bubbles game.

Bonus: Serials for the Riley Andersen Numbers (RAN series)

RAN-001 - Joy Woman - Weapon: Joyous Sunburst

RAN-002 - Sadness Woman - Weapon: Sad Raincloud

RAN-003 - Anger Man - Weapon: Angry Flame

RAN-004 - Disgust Woman - Weapon: Blooming Disgust

RAN-005 - Fear Man - Weapon: Frantic Fright

20) Some of the police wondered where he'd pulled them from, but Rock just winked and said 'secret' before pulling another from his subspace pocket.

21) We don't know his name. Only that he's from Canada.

22) FFFFFFFFFF–

23) How the heck does that eve–

24) ...well okay then...

25) That small tremor you felt was probably me facefaulting.

26) I don't know about you, but I found this scene creepy as hell while writing it. NiGHTcapD noted that it was proof Slenderman had a heart; twisted, withered, and corrupted beyond mortal comprehension; but there.

27) Sometimes, Roll scales mountains. Other times, she slays them.

28) Roll's broom is far from being 'just' a broom. She's just not used to someone calling it a 'rocket'.

29) Hold on... I've got something in my eye...

30) Will Riley Andersen please report to Lost and Found, we have your Train of Thought. Repeat: Will Riley Andersen pl–

31) A little fridge logic based on some of what we see in the movie. The central emotion can probably be considered the 'lead' emotion of a person's head, implying that it's the person's 'nature'. Joy denotes someone naturally optimistic and extroverted, Sadness someone more sympathetic and introverted, Anger a person aggressive and competitive, Disgust someone either health conscious or socially conscious, and Fear someone naturally timid. All of which grows and changes through life experience, creating exceptionally complex individuals.

32) Me: Well... Damn... That's a hell of a hole I've dug myself.

FTKnight: ...Crisis let's be honest here, there are many things that could be used to describe what you have dug, but called it a hole is like saying Everest is a hill.

33) Keep in mind the emotions likely have no idea how to throw a proper punch or kick beyond watching action movies with Riley.

34) What kind of conversation does that even come up in? Did Riley overhear part of a news report or something?

35) More fridge logic, because in the movie, Defcon 2 was all him losing his temper (in an admittedly controlled fashion), with the alert level never going higher. Which logically means there's one above it. And what's one step past losing your temper? Actual violence. Granted, Mr. Andersen is not the kind of character to use that against his daughter, but in her defense? The guy's lead emotion is Anger. You hurt his family at your own peril.

Which actually brings up some more fridge logic: Those multi-key safety locks? The ones that seem to exist solely to keep the man's Anger from hauling off without cause? They represent Mr. Andersen's control over his temper. Makes you wonder a bit about what his childhood was like to result in a headquarters like that, doesn't it?

36) See the chapter titled A Mega Halloween for more details on that meeting.

37) Hands up: Who forgot the emotion weapons deal zero physical damage?

38) kingofsouls foresaw a heavy metal beatdown. See Omake number 2 for details.

But seriously: Real song - www. youtube watch? v=krtG2l2Po5E

39) Question: Is synchronized ass-kicking already a thing? Answer: Apparently yes. Not a frequent thing, but it's been done according to several responses since the first posting of the chapter. That's actually a something of a relief. I think I'd have been a bit disappointed in humanity if it wasn't.

40) It was generally agreed that the Lights didn't have it much better. They not only had to clean up their lab and home, but also untangle

all of the various experimental tech that had warped it in the first place.

41) Sarcastic as it may be, the man has a point.

42) Ew.

43) The Phineas and Ferb Fused noodle Loop thanks to input from Hvulpes, calvinball, and kingofsouls. Because I know you've been wanting to know the Phineas and Ferb Numbers, here's a few me and those three put together:

Roller Man (PFN-001)

Roller Man is one high-flying, fun-loving, roller coaster-riding robot! With the wheels on his feet, he rides the rails of the roller coaster through twists and turns, dips and dives, loop-de-loops, and more!

Master Weapon: Roller Skates - This 'weapon' allows the user to form roller skates on their feet for high-intensity extreme sports action!

Lemonade Man (PFN-002)

Lemonade Man is the answer to beat the summer heat. He's here to serve ice-cold lemonade to one and all!

Master Weapon: Lemonade Squirt - This 'weapon' fires pressurized bursts of pure, sweet lemonade for accurate no-spill service up to a hundred feet away! Ice included!

Wash Man (PFN-003)

When there is a car that needs washing, Wash Man is there to cleanse the dirt and make that car shine! Warning: Beware operating within 1,000 meters of Roll Light as intense rivalry may develop.

Master Weapon: Hydro Wash - This 'weapon' lets loose a small torrent of soap/water to clean the toughest of mud cakes that cover a

car!

Snow Cone Man (PFN-004)

Snow cones and S'Winter for all to enjoy!

Master Weapon: Snow Scoop - This 'weapon' allows for the quick and accurate serving of frozen treats! Upgraded to also serve ice cream. With toppings.

Phineas Man and Ferb Man (PFN-005a and PFN-005b)

These two Brobots have been upgraded to be Robot Masters, and are skilled with the daunting and overwhelmingly evil task of micromanagement.

Master Weapon: Bro Creator - This 'weapon' creates a Brobot replica. It's not very sturdy nor lasts very long (shoddy design) these replicas can help build projects by summoning a workforce from out of nowhere.

Hair Woman (PFN-006)

The ultimate stylist has arrived! Shorter hair? Longer hair? She can do it all!

Master Weapon: Hair Growth - This 'weapon' accelerates hair growth, possibly generating weeks of growth in seconds! Good thing Hair Woman is equipped with a suite of barber tools to trim any excess!

Soccer Man X7 (PFN-007)

The gravity-defying athlete we all wish we could be, Soccer Man X7 can run up walls, across rails, and even upside down!

Master Weapon: Gravity Run - This 'weapon' allows the user to defy gravity and run on any surface that will support them!

Gordian Man (PFN-008)

The master of knots has arrived!

Master Weapon: Knots-A-Lot - This 'weapon' produces a length of rope sufficient for tying whatever manner of knot is needed, from a simple half-hitch to the legendary Gordian Knot itself!

Hockey Man Z9 (PFN-009)

The post-apocalyptic sports machine of the future, Hockey Man Z9 will take on any obstacles, from polar bears, to flames, to land mines, to other players to score that goal!

Master Weapon: Slap Shot - He shoots, he scores!

44) www. theguardian world/ 2015/ jun/ 29/ tama-the-cat-3000-attend-elaborate-funeral-for-japans-feline-stationmaster

Tama. A female calico housecat, formerly a stray, that served as the stationmaster at the Kishi station of Japan's rail line from 2006 until her death earlier in 2015 at the age of 16. For a while, she was the station's only employee and she single-pawedly saved the rail from closing. At the time of her death, the company elevated her to the posthumous position of Honorable Eternal Stationmaster and the Japanese people elevated her to the position of Shinto Goddess. She's new upstairs.

45) www. youtube watch? v=hHkKJfcBXcw

46) The Palici twins (no individual names I've yet found) are twin sons of Hephaestus and geyser gods. So... Geysers, hot water, steam, sons of a forge god... They're clearly steampunks. :P

Also, because I didn't mention it earlier, Tama has joined Madoka as one of Heph's apprentices. I'll see if I can't find an excuse to compile some of the Admin shenanigans involving her.

47) Bes is an interesting god. At least I thought so the first time I read *The Kane Chronicles* (from which I cribbed a fair bit of his personality). For more info: www. landofpyramids bes. htm

48) There had been no further full robot invasions after the Slenderman, but there had been a few hiccups along the way. Such as a fringe anti-robot terrorist group called the Emerald Spears to name one example, at one point resulting in Riley's dad getting into a fistfight with the leader, Xander Payne.

49) She'd also noted, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, that puberty was nowhere near all it was cracked up to be.

Bonus Content: Deus Ex Rage Quit Omake by Zerorock41

[Non-Canon][Mega Man/Inside Out/Adminspace]

Slendy would have been smirking if he had a face. Everything was going according to plan. The girl was his, and now he could ttly fck with those Mega Dweebs without fear of–

AFTFDUYFGAYFYTGW–

(Adminspace)

The Slenderman woke up at his terminal. "What the F**k? My in-loop Avatar-"

"Has been forcefully ejected."

A comically large sweatdrop appeared on Slendy's head as he slowly turned around. Much to his shock and fear, an angry Hephaestus, an angry Skuld and an even more angry Janus were standing before him. Looking past them, a chuckling Cthulhu sat.

Slendy realized then and there: He was right fucked.

(In-Loop)

Riley simply stopped moving and the Emotion Masters were free to move around again. With help from Dr. Light, Rock and Roll returned the emotions to their place in Riley's head, Mr. and Mrs. Andersen simply cradled their daughter (who started panicking once her emotions got back into place), and Rock and Roll made note never to screw with people's heads ever again.

Happy Halloween Everyone!

Bonus Content: (Scratch)Jem and the Holograms(/Scratch) Riley and the Emotions Omake by kingofsouls:

[Non-Canon][Mega Man/Inside Out]

The two robots lay on the ground, comatose in their despair. Now with them out of the way, nothing would stand between Riley and himself. Not even Doctor...

"HEY SLENDY!"

Slender Man turned around, and if he had eyebrows would have raised them as he looked at the strange sight. Riley was standing there with a double necked guitar, alongside her emotions in their natural non-robotic forms. They also bore instruments of various shapes and sizes.

The speed of constructing this stage was on par with the average build time of those two children from the Tri-State Area.

He was about to refute their advance before Riley screamed "For those about to rock..." into the mic, letting forth a stream of pyrotechnics and a heavy metal riff of her ax. A visible wall of sound burst from the comically oversized amps that no one noticed until that exact moment despite each one roughly the size of a small

moving truck, and like a rocket the sound raced towards Slender Man and slammed into him, launching him into a wall.

This did not stop Riley and her emotions. They shouted as one, with even more pyrotechnics firing, larger than the previous with the added perk of changing colors. **"WE SALUTE YOU!"**

What next could only be described as musical massacre so metal that the finale of the impromptu rock show Crashed the Loop in an explosion of heavy metal, pure determination, silent screams of rage, and even the color orange.

Bonus content: Inside Out Loops (by kingofsouls, Xomniac, LordCirce, Blazingen1, Purrs (editor) - Originally posted to Spacebattles on July 8th 2015)

How Riley Andersen Loops

Riley Anchors her home loop (Inside out). Her emotions - Joy, Sadness, Disgust, Anger, and Fear - are "Emotional Loopers". Riley is a normal Anchor, and thus no special rules apply to her. Her Emotions however have special rules that apply to them.

During each Loop, the status of an Emotional Looper depends if Riley herself is Awake or not.

If Riley is Awake, at least one of her Emotions is Awake as well. This is to provide stability for Riley herself.

If Riley is not Awake, there is no guarantee that any of the Emotions are Awake as well. The "At least one Awake" rule only applies if Riley is Awake.

An Emotional Looper cannot exist in any Loop without their host. In other words, if the Emotions are in a loop, Riley is also in that Loop.

An Emotional Looper can Loop in outside of Riley. This can take any form, such as being a relative of Riley. Again, they cannot exist outside of a Loop Riley is not in.

If Riley does something stupid and causes a Loop Crash, the Awake Emotions get punished as well. Sucks, but they are a part of her so it's something that cannot be helped. The inverse is also true.

Emotional Loopers have all standard Looper Powers such as the Ping and Subspace Pockets.

Emotional Loopers cannot directly access their Host's Subspace Pocket.

Riley's mindspace - i.e where the Emotions and everything in it - is a part of Riley. How it works is below:

Riley's mindspace is that of Baseline Riley before Awakening. This includes any Core Memories Riley would have created before Awakening.

The Exact moment Riley Awakens, her mindspace instantaneously shifts to what it was during the previous loop. This includes Core Memories. Any unAwake Emotion will most likely panic at this point as they would not know why the core memories suddenly changed and why Riley is still functioning normally as if they hadn't

When Riley Awakens, her Core Memory holder will shift into a tiered design, with In-Loop Core Memories (Core Memories Riley obtained before Awakening during a Loop) on the bottom tier and her Baseline/Looping Core Memories on the top tier. Core Memories created by an unAwake Riley do not Loop with her.

Inside Out.1 (kingofsouls)

-Reality-

Riley Andersen.

11 year old, born in Minnesota.

Favorite Sport: Hockey.

Family Nickname: Monkey

Riley sat in the car, approaching their new home in San Francisco. Mom was reading the map, directing the little family towards an uncertain future in their new home.

Yet for Riley it wasn't exactly uncertain.

She swore that she had already lived through this. It was either that or she was overthinking things.

"Riley, look at that!" Riley eyed what her mother noticed: A collection of giant dinosaurs.

She smiled as the family slowed down and prepared to visit. At the very least, the familiarity felt nice.

-Meanwhile, at Headquarters-

Havoc was an apt description of how Joy's last week had been. The most primary concern of hers was keeping Riley happy, that much was true, but this situation overrode that harder than a landslide crashing down a mountain.

Mostly because of the panic Fear was endlessly screaming, running to and fro as Riley's emotions tried to make sense of the crisis that they faced. He was screaming on and on to the point where Joy didn't really mind Anger punching him to make him stop, even if it only bought a few seconds of silent calm.

"Fear, I know the whole being afraid thing is yours, but aren't you being a little bit...dramatic?"

Fear stopped in the middle of his raving to face Joy, the emotion and Ringleader of Riley's emotions standing calm. "Joy, we are in the middle of a catastrophe!? How can you be so calm about Riley's life turning upside down?"

"It's not so bad Fear, honest! It could be an adventure!"

Fear grabbed Joy in panic, taking her to the control Panel. With a push of a button, several memories came from Long Term Memory. "Joy I am not sure if you noticed – OF COURSE YOU NOTICED YOU WERE THERE – but Riley's memories aren't working right! It was fine a week ago but now everything isn't working right, and we should panic!"

To prove his point he recalled a memory, the golden orb coming down from Long Term Memory and showing the memory inside: Riley in full hockey gear, standing in a park with her team, grinning in unison. Her parents stood off to the side, their joy in their daughter evident. Joy just scoffed as she walked over to Fear. "Fear, there's nothing off about that memory. Riley had a good time. Heck, we got pretty far. Quarterfinals, am I right?"

"Joy, that's not what I'm panicking about." He replayed the memory, and froze it on a rather jarring piece of evidence: The Golden Gate Bridge standing tall in the distance. "How can Riley have a memory of being with a hockey team in San Francisco! We've never been to San Francisco!"

"Fear makes a pretty good point." mused Anger behind his paper.

"See, even Anger agrees with me. And don't get me started with the Core Memories and the Islands."

With a push of it's button, Fear opened up the holder for the Core Memories - the very essence of Riley. In them stood several of them, many of the orbs a mix of different colors.

Joy's (new) favourite was a golden orb mixed with blue, Riley embracing her parents in a tearful hug as Mom and Dad returned it. Joy could almost feel the raw power of that single moment.

Fear didn't see it that way. "The core memories changed as well, Joy. Her entire personality could have changed! These are the end times, Joy!" Fear bellowed, shaking Joy as he begun to panic like he had never panicked before – a great feat to accomplish for a man who was the embodiment of fear itself. "The end times I tell you! The end times!"

"Uh... Anger? Could you...?"

With a single punch, Fear smashed into the glass windows of Headquarters, Fear slumping off into unconsciousness. Brushing herself off, Joy smiled at Anger, the emotion walking back to his couch. "Thank you."

"Fear has a point, Joy." Disgust, having been looking out of the windows and at the Islands of Personality – the strongest parts of Riley's personality given form within the mindscape – called over Joy as she gave a look of indifference towards the Islands. "Core Memories don't change overnight. I mean, can you even get another memory to replace a Core Memory? I hope so, because those new Islands are clashing with each others color schemes."

Joy mused, walking back and forth as Sadness leafed through a mind manual. "I don't think so. Nothing in the manuals say anything about Core Memories just... changing overnight, or Core Memories of two different emotional colors. What do we do Joy?"

Joy said nothing as she paced, thinking and thinking about what was happening. For some reason, the others were unable to remember what had happened in the past year and expressed concern about the sudden change.

Yet Joy had not. Why?

Before she knew it, Joy found herself surrounded by her fellow emotions, Fear awoken from his impromptu slumber. They eyed Joy with expectant eyes, eager for her to lead. It was if they were lost sheep, and Joy their shepherd who always knew where to go.

"Joy? What do we do?"

Joy uttered the words she was always afraid to say:

"I... I don't know."

Inside Out.2 (kingofsouls)

-Reality-

Riley heard the news again that day. How her father had once again gotten a new job, and how they were *once again* moving to San Fransisco for that job.

Somehow, someway, Riley was back in her old home, just in time to move to her new one. *Again* .

Something was definitely strange. She slowly swept her gaze over her room, once filled with her possessions, now barren and save for her laptop.

On impulse, Riley flipped it open and turned it on. She was thankful Dad hadn't disconnected the wifi yet, just in case it was still needed. Which, in her opinion, it most certainly was.

After all, she needed to do some research.

-Headquarters-

Anger muttered irritably as he sat on his couch eyeing the other Emotions as they processed the changes that had overcome Riley

before they knew what was happening.

Currently, Fear and Disgust gazed at the Islands of Personality in confusion, taking in the... *altered* view. Sure, the five initial Islands, Goofball, Hockey, Friendship, Honesty and Family were all there, but they were vastly overshadowed by the array of much larger and more detailed Islands that loomed before them.

While the two cautious Emotions were relatively okay with the situation for the moment, Joy was an entirely different story. The peppy Emotion had taken one look at the scenery before bolting for the Core Memories. While the fact that the original five golden Memories she was responsible for were faded and cloudy was enough to whip her into a frenzy, it was the sight of the mottled colors of the far more prominent and influential Memories that had induced the mother of all panic attacks, causing her to rush to a far corner of Headquarters where she was currently hyperventilating while muttering about finding her happy place. Sadness stood vigil, concern for Joy obviously mounting within the blue Emotion.

Overall, the Emotions knew something was *seriously* off about their situation, but Riley was normal, the Islands, odd as they were, were working perfectly, and for whatever reason Fear couldn't truly find it in himself to get Riley to panic. Hence, the real question was if there was a problem in the first place.

"You know, those islands look kind of tacky..."

"You think they're safe? They look kind of crowded. Do you think there's a chance of cross-contamination?"

"How can the Islands cross-contaminate?"

"I don't know, actually. I just hope things won't get any worse."

"I don't see how they could look any *worse* . Heck, I'm freaking out just as much as you usually do."

"I do not freak out that much." Disgust scoffed, giving him *that* look. "Okay, so maybe I do freak out a lot, but come on, it's my job! I need to keep Riley safe, you of all people should know what that's like!"

"Then be afraid then! *Look* at this mess!" The green entity waved her arms frantically. "Doesn't *any* of this ring any alarm bells with you!?

"I'm trying Disgust, but I-I-!" Fear fumbled frantically for a second before groaning and slapping a hand to his face. "I just can't. I know I should be afraid, but I'm not. I'm more afraid about not being afraid." Fear gasped, implications finally reaching him. "Oh no. What if I'm sick? What if I'm crazy? What if I'm sick *and* crazy!? What's going to happen to Riley!? I can't keep RIley safe if I'm sick and crazy!"

Anger rolled his eyes as he shuffled his paper. "We're emotions, genius. We don't get sick."

" *You don't know that for sure!* "

Anger huffed as he balled up his newspaper **'BREAKING NEWS: TIME IN TURMOIL! WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON!?'** , deciding enough was enough. "Alright, enough is enough. You two arguing isn't going to get us anywhere any time fast."

Disgust was the first to gag. "Anger, I'm not sure if you've noticed, but the Islands are different and Riley *isn't* acting weird. Isn't that a good time for you to do your job?"

"Look, you want proof everything's alright? It's standing right in front of you." Anger jabbed a fuzzy finger forwards.

Fear flinched as he glanced left and right frantically before staring at his shorter counterpart in confusion. "M-m-me?"

"No, doofus, the *other* purple coward. *Of course you!* " Anger barked irritably. "You're not panicking about the islands, you're not freaking out about how Riley's acting, and you know why? It's because deep

down, you *know* that this is right and that this is how it should be! Am I wrong?"

"U-uh, well, I, uh..." Fear shuffled nervously as he was put on the spot.

"That's what I thought." Anger nodded gruffly. "Instead of making Riley worry about the changes inside of herself, you should be making her panic about how the world's changed around her instead."

Fear's pupils shrank to pinpricks as he processed that statement. He tried to dart for the console...

" *Except!* "

And was promptly brought to a halt by Anger grabbing the back of his collar and holding him in place.

"I'm not going to *let* you do that." The tough Emotion growled. "Panicking won't accomplish anything. What Riley needs most of all at the moment is a clear head, and that's what I'm going to give her."

"How come Joy's freaking out but you're taking this so calmly, huh?" Disgust cocked an eyebrow expectantly.

The red Emotion snorted as he cast a glance at the panicking Emotion. "That's easy: Tinkerbell over there can't handle the concept of Riley having a less than perfect day, much less the idea of her having any Core Memories that *aren't* glittery gold."

"Hey..." Sadness frowned as she tried (and failed, she couldn't help but note miserably) to comfort her hysterical friend. "That's not very nice..."

"You gonna tell me it ain't true?" Anger cocked an eyebrow expectantly.

Sadness hesitated before biting her lip and focusing on Joy again.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"So how is this doing your job?" huffed Disgust.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, Anger got up and walked towards the console, keeping a close eye on Joy as he went in case she decided to do something rash. "Then let me explain. Just yesterday we were in San Francisco, and now we're back in Minnesota, ready to move to San Francisco *again* . And the only two who remember are Riley, and me."

"I figure that since it seems like we're in some sort of a science fiction movie, and a really bad one might I add, some research might be in order. Good thing Riley thought of it." Anger shuddered heavily.

After the... 'incident', he'd sworn off putting ideas in Riley's head. At least, not without a cool head and consent from the whole crew anyways. Something he wasn't going to get any time soon if Joy's frantic rocking back-and-forth was anything to go by.

"Anyway, what better place to start than the internet, using all of those stupid sci-fi movies dad made us watch instead of the cartoons we wanted as a point of reference?" Anger manned the console, pushing a button and summoning a Memory from Long Term Memory.

"Tripledent Gum! Will-!"

Anger hastily let go of the joysticks as his eye twitched in impotent rage, a torrent of flames erupting from his skull. The last thing Riley needed at the moment was to put her fist through her computer's monitor in a burst of inexplicable fury.

'One of these days...' He thought murderously. *'I'm going to turn each and every one of those chortling doofuses into charcoal.'*

Inside Out.3 (kingofsouls - cross with HP)

-Headquarters-

Joy grinned as she opened her eyes. "Another bright new day." She leapt up to her feet, and danced over to the central console to check up on Riley's Core Memories, and to see if they had shifted or not. She hummed softly to herself as the column rose, before choking. The core memories were... yellow! And there were only six.

"Oh no, now this weird, deja vu thing is taking away the Core Memories!" Joy moaned as she paced around the central console. "Ok, think, Joy, think. Where could the Core Memories have gotten off to?" Joy peeked through her fingers at the rack of books off to one side. "Maybe I should skim through the manuals?" Joy shuddered. "Not that desperate yet."

That was how the other emotions found her a few moments later, pacing in circles in front of the center console.

"Already up and at it, eh?" Fear smiled, weakly. "Figured you'd be excited about this trip to school."

Joy jumped, then spun around, plastering a smile on. "Oh, yep. School. Super excited for school and... books." Joy grinned a bit wider.

Disgust huffed. "I just can't believe we have to ride a train. I mean, it better be cleaner than that alleyway that we bought our things in. That place was filthy, and I don't even want to think about all those things we had to buy for potions."

Joy blinked. *'Train? Alleyway? Potions?'* Before she could properly ask, Fear jumped in, holding up a large chart.

"So, I've had to revamp our Potential Animal Attack Anxiety Scale with all of the new information from the books we read. Do you think Dragon should go between Bear and Shark attack, or Lion and Alligator?"

Joy opened her mouth, but Fear just kept on rambling. "I mean, I was thinking of putting it at the very top, but then we read about manticores, and I remembered that nature documentary with the alligator and the goat, and that time with the bee's nest on our head, and..."

"That's great, Fear." Joy cut him off. "Um, do you think you could excuse me for just a moment?" Without waiting for him to respond, Joy darted off, quickly ducking behind a set of shelves. Rapidly, Joy began scanning across the memories.

"Ok, let's see. We have a few childhood thoughts. A couple of school memories. Britain? We're living in Britain?" Joy ducked out to look out of the window. "Hockey Island's still there, so that's a relief. Friendship, Family, all the basics." Joy blinked as she realized something. "Wait, there's six. What's the island with the big cauldron supposed to be?" Glancing surreptitiously around, Joy snuck forward and poked at the unfamiliar memory on the Core Memory Stand.

– Riley was sitting on a chair in the living room, watching an older woman who was talking to her parents. The woman smiled, setting down the teacup she was drinking, and then pulling out a long thin stick, which she waved through the air sharply.

Immediately, the tea cup rose into the air, spinning around and rotating slowly. Another wave of the stick lead to all of the tea rising out of the cup and transforming into a flower, which floated over and settled into Riley's hands.

"Miss Andersen, you are a witch."–

The memory began to loop over, as Joy stared, mouth agape. *'What is going on?'*

Joy had managed to gather her wits as she stepped forward to the console, where Fear was currently fretting over the controls.

Glancing at the View Screen, Joy saw that they were getting out of the car and hauling a big trunk into a crowded train station.

Fear glanced up as she skipped up (total upheaval of her worldview wasn't going to keep Joy from bouncing on her feet) and let out a massive sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness you're back. Joy, I don't know if we can do this. I mean, McGonagall said that we have to walk through a solid wall to get through to the platform, and what if we walk into the wrong one? I've estimated that there are at least a dozen walls in there, and we could get the wrong one, and then we'll smack our nose and we'll miss the train and..."

"Fear!" Joy cut him off. "It will be ok. We are going to be fine." *'I hope.'* "Now, we just have to follow Mom and Dad, and we'll make it to the platform."

"Right. Right." Fear nodded tiredly.

"There you are!" Joy turned as Anger stomped over. "Where have you been? Fear's been hogging the console, and we dropped the stupid trunk on our foot, so we're still getting some Pain-a-grams sent in, though they've downgraded to Sore Status by now."

Joy reached over to tap a couple of buttons. "I was just getting a few things together to help get Riley excited for this trip." Several memories popped up one after another. Memories of a family train ride out into the country, a play pretend game of being a magic princess when she was younger (featuring Bing Bong), and the meeting with McGonagall. The room seemed to light up a bit brighter as Riley's excitement built up.

Anger huffed. "Ok. Well, good. Glad you're back on the ball."

Joy nodded. "Yep. Now, I want you to take the wheel for a bit, help Riley get that trunk to the train. Think determined thoughts."

Anger smirked. "That trunk'll never know what hit it."

Joy grinned. "That's the spirit." Twirling, she darted over to Disgust, who was sitting back on the couch. "Disgust, we're going to need to be making new friends. I need you to be on the lookout for good potential."

Disgust sighed. "Alright. I just hope that we don't get stuck wearing those baggy robes all the time. So unfashionable."

"Fear, start thinking up the ways magic spells could go wrong. We don't know what magic can do, so we need to be prepared. And have you seen Sadness?"

Fear nodded as he started scribbling at a sheet. "Yeah, she's over there." He gestured towards the manual shelves.

Joy walked over, then winced. Sadness was standing in the chalk Circle of Sadness.

"Hey, Sadness."

Sadness glanced up, then slumped back down. "Hey."

Joy sighed, then drew herself up. She knew what she needed to do. "So, I'm going to be doing my best to keep Riley excited, but I know that she is going to end up missing home. So, I need you to start thinking about a good letter to write to home. Don't be afraid to let some sadness show."

Sadness looked up, eyes wide with disbelief. "Really?"

Joy nodded, determinedly. "Yep, really. If we're going to keep Riley happy, we have to let the sadness show a bit sometimes too." Then, reaching down, Joy quickly scruffed out the Circle of Sadness.

-Reality-

Out on the Hogwarts Express, Harry, Ron, and Hermione observed the new girl.

"And you're sure she's not Awake?"

Harry nodded. "Positive. I mentioned time travel twice in my introduction, and it didn't so much as blip on her radar. So, either she is an excellent actor and Stealth Looper, or she isn't Awake."

Ron shrugged. "Eh, whatever. Want to go turn Draco into a monkey?"

Harry grinned. "I've got the crate for Borneo all ready to go."

Inside Out.4 (LordCirce)

-Headquarters-

Fear hummed to himself as he opened up the newspaper and sat back to monitor Riley's dreams. If there was one thing he was glad for, it was that even when time repeated with this whole, deja vu experience, Riley's dreams were almost always different. Even when Fear was the only one remembering, and none of Riley's special Core Memories showed up, the dreams were always just a little different. Kept things interesting, but not too interesting.

The first dream of the night started up, showing a happy pizza parlor, probably inspired by the horrible pizza they had eaten the night before.

"And cue dancing pizza slices." Fear chuckled.

Only it didn't happen. The pizza didn't get up and dance, the balls in the ball pit didn't turn into ice cream, and Rainbow Unicorn didn't come dancing in to join the band on stage. If Fear hadn't known for a

fact that Riley was asleep, he might of thought he was seeing a normal memory.

Then the lights went out.

"Oh, here we go, it's going to be a nightmare. Great." Fear grumbled slightly as he pulled out a clipboard. "And they didn't even have the decency to send up a warning. I wonder if it's too late to wake up Joy."

Even as Fear surreptitiously began to stand up, an eerie tune began playing in the dream. Lightning flashed, and Fear gulped, as the brief light had made it seem like the animatronic figures on the stage had moved.

"PEEKABOO!" Suddenly, the face of the stuffed bear that was the mascot for the pizza place popped up in the middle of the View Screen, mouth wide and full of sharp teeth.

"AHHHH!" Fear screamed, slapping desperately at the abort button.

-Reality-

Riley shot up and Awake with a jolt, her eyes wide, as the fearful nightmare dissipated from her mind. After several frantic moments, Riley slumped back onto her bed, groaning.

From now on, she was not going to eat any more broccoli pizza right before bed.

Inside Out.5 (Kingofsouls)

-Headquarters-

Joy and Disgust circled the column that bore the Core Memories, the multicolored orbs glistening in the light of Headquarters. Around and around they went, like two sharks circling their helpless prey.

To say that Joy was in a state of panic was an understatement. "Okay Joy, calm down." she told herself. Her arms were thrust into the air, thus ruining her illusion of total control, but at this point Joy didn't care. "It's cool. It's totally cool. It's only the core memories that make up Riley's very fiber and being suddenly being turned into other Core Memories that. Aren't. Happy. But it's cool. Totally cool."

Joy wasn't a good liar. It was clear that she was having a panic attack that wasn't going to end soon.

Disgust in turn groaned, the sound mixed with her trademark gag, "Stop whining about the Core Memories Joy, they're fine!"

"But they're not happy!"

"Joy, are the Islands up and running, there is no problem with them."

Joy screeched to a halt, facing the windows that showcased the Islands. All of them – old and new – were fully functioning, proof that Joy's fears were unfounded.

At least, to everyone *except* Joy. "Disgust, they're not happy!"

"Joy, Riley is in the car moving back to San Francisco again. With all of our stuff in a moving van! And this wasn't the first time me and Riley were stuck doing this. We're doing the whole week of heck again like one of Dad's dumb sci-fi movies!"

It was true: Off to the side near the couch was a small mountain of memories stacked in a neat pile. Several of the memories contained functional duplicates of each other, with only small changes here and there. Anger sat there, reading The Mind Reader **'RILEY REPEATING MOVE AGAIN. WE'RE NOT SURE WHY EITHER.'** ,

staying out of the scuffle with Disgust and Joy for now. With a scowl on his face.

"You know what that means right?"

"It means that Riley won't be happy?"

"It means that if this keeps up," Disgust then gasped in horror, having trouble coming to grips with what she was about to say, "it means the fashion trends won't change! Riley will be stuck wearing the same outfits every day for the rest of her life! *You realize that this is an emergency now right? RIGHT!?* "

Joy didn't know what to say to that, mostly because it was a little... out there.

Inside Out.6 (LordCirce)

-Reality-

Riley shuddered, crouching behind the barricade of desks that had been erected in the center of the darkened room. Beside her, several of the other kids crouched. Several of them were crying, and holding each other. For some reason, tears just wouldn't come to Riley's eyes.

'This is not right.'

-Headquarters-

"THIS IS A DISASTER!" Fear was pulling what little hair he had out as he struggled at the console. It was all that he could do to keep from sending Riley off screaming to find some place to hide. The main issue with that course of action was that this was the only place *to* hide. And even then it might not last long.

Unbidden, the Recall Light activated, and memories of what had happened early popped up on the screen.

– Riley had been standing up to give a presentation to the class, when suddenly, one of her classmate's cell phones had started ringing. The teacher had glanced up, but before she could reprimand Sally, the owner of the cell phone, Thomas's cell phone had started to go off as well. Then Judy and Heather's. Riley's had been part of the next batch, and she pulled it out to find that it was Mom calling her.

Riley had glanced at the bewildered looking teacher, and then had hit Answer.

"Hello?"

"RILEY! Thank god you're safe." Her mom sounded frantic, and Riley's breath caught at the panic in her mother's voice. "Riley, listen, you cannot go outside. Stay inside, and...we'll come find you."–

"Turn that off!" Anger's voice was sharp, and Fear quickly turned off the Recalled Memory.

"It wasn't me. The subconscious is overflowing, and they keep shooting them back up here."

Anger growled. "Well, whatever. It ain't helping me in getting any of the others to respond."

Fear glanced back at the rest of Headquarters. Memories orbs were rolling around everywhere, most of them the purple hue of Fear or the green hue of Disgust. The purple outnumbered the green though, given the fact that Disgust had gone comatose after the… incident in the hallway.

Almost as if drawn by Fear's thoughts (and maybe an accidental panicked button press), the Recall Lamp lit up again.

– Riley was peering out of the door to her classroom. Her teacher had run off after receiving a phone call on the class phone, leaving the class sitting there. Shortly thereafter, the power had died, leading to several of the students screaming. Riley's mom hadn't told her what was making her so upset, and from what the rest of her classmates said, none of their parents had either.

After several moments of sitting in the dark, Riley had decided to peek out of the door. The hallway was darker than the classroom, on account of fewer windows. Riley had crept out slowly, while the rest of her classmates had peeked out behind her.

Then came the scream.

A teacher, one that Riley had only seen in passing, came dashing through one of the doors off to the side, screaming loudly. He spun, grabbing the door to try and close it, only for it to crash open and let... something through.

"Zombie." Riley's voice was barely a whisper, as she watched the zombie grab at the teacher. It seemed surreal, like a movie or something. Then the zombie bit down.–

WHAM Anger's fist smashed down on the console, knocking the Recalled Memory off. "WHAT DID I JUST SAY?"

Fear flinched back. "I'm sorry. I'm trying the best I can, but... I don't know what to do. I just know I'm never complaining about moving to San Francisco again."

Anger growled. "You can say that again." Anger and Fear were the only two who remembered things being different this time. Joy, as per usual, hadn't paid any attention to what they were saying, Sadness had moped in the corner, and Disgust had looked at them like they were crazy.

Fear glanced towards the couch. Now, Disgust was sitting there, staring off into the distance, her entire body shuddering. Sadness

was sobbing back by the manuals, probably soaking them through. And Joy...

Joy was catatonic. She was just sitting, staring at the Core Memories, but not doing anything. Just rocking back and forth.

"Do... do you think that the whole 'deja vu' thing is why we didn't fall apart?" Fear was honestly wondering about that at this point. If anyone should be breaking down, it should be him, but he wasn't. Part of it was that it just didn't seem real, and part... part of him just felt braver.

"I just hope that the Deja Vu thing doesn't make any of this mess another Core Memory." Anger glowered at the screen, his fingers flexing and unflexing.

Fear paused, taking a deep breath, then stepped back from the controls. "I think... I think you need to take the wheel right now. I... Riley needs to be ready to fight, not try and run away."

Anger blinked, staring at Fear. By their nature, none of the emotions really liked to give up control at the console. For the most part, they deferred to Joy, mainly because that typically led to the best outcome for Riley, but they all still wanted to do their part, to help Riley along in their own way. Stepping back... took some courage.

"Alright. But keep an eye out. Never know where those zombies will jump out from." Anger stomped forward and grabbed the levers.

-Reality-

Riley exhaled, and something in her chest seemed to firm up. She hadn't heard from Mom since that first call, and neither she nor Dad were answering. Riley was worried, really worried, but, she glanced around the classroom, right now, worry wasn't what she needed. Her classmates were doing enough of that.

Gripping the hockey stick that she had in her hands, Riley let the burning anger she was filling swell up. When those zombies came, if they came, she would be ready to fight.

Inside Out.7 (kingofsouls)

-Reality-

Another day, another repeat.

Another repeat, another move to San Francisco.

Another move to San Fran, another first day of school.

Riley went through the motions, playing along with her parents as they bid her farewell on her (by Riley's count, twenty-first) first day of school.

And so Riley walked, a smile on her face as she thought about what to do this repeat. Whatever the case, Riley felt pretty good about herself.

Almost as if something put her sadness somewhere else... at least for now.

-Headquarters-

The single door that led out of Headquarters, used only for Mind Workers, opened, and into Headquarters slinked Sadness.

Unfortunately for Sadness, Anger was standing there, waiting for her. "Hello Sadness."

"Hi Anger..."

"So, where were you?"

"...uh... I was..."

"Sadness, you went into Long Term Memory, didn't you?" Sadness sighed, Anger hitting the nail on the head as the red Emotion's head started to spark. "You know we're not supposed to go into Long Term Memory!"

"I know, but..."

"But what?"

"You wouldn't understand..."

Flames began to rise. "Try me."

"...I was visiting Bing Bong."

This calmed Anger down as the flames that were just beginning to form subsided. "That pink clod? All I need to know. Just don't do it again. You could get lost in in there and then we'd have to pull double duty to make up for it."

Sadness simply nodded in agreement as Anger went off to sit at his happy place - the couch.

"Hey Sadness, you're gonna miss the first day of school!"

Sadness smiled as Joy waved at her. The glowing emotion was (to Sadness's great relief) was a lot more open to having the other emotions man the console than the other two Joy's Sadness had met.

She was still hyperactive but eh, it was Joy. Not much could be done there.

Inside Out.8 (LordCirce/kingofsouls)

Takeout Chinese food.

Idly Riley played with it, her chopsticks sending a piece of broccoli back and forth inside her box in a never ending game of back and forth. It seemed fitting, as no matter how many times the (evil) broccoli she played with moved inside the box, it was still the same piece of broccoli in the same box being played with by the same Riley that did the same action seconds ago.

The similarities to her situation were uncanny, and accurate.

"So, how was the first day of school?"

She's probing... again.

This was the thirty-fourth time Riley had relieved her life, and without fail Mom asked her that same question.

Time to dance the same old dance again...

- *Headquarters* -

Joy sat with her fellow emotions, watching through the view screen. "Say something happy." She urged. Disgust just scoffed, gently pushing a button on the console.

"It was... boring I guess."

"That's not happy."

"Uh, of course not." the fashionista scoffed. "I'm not you."

"Then let me let Riley be happy!"

Disgust rolled her eyes as Joy struggled to get out of the ropes that bound her to the chair she was in. Thanks to these repeats, Joy had become... well unhinged wasn't exactly the most polite thing to say to a colleague.

Then again Disgust wasn't always polite.

"Joy, do you want out of the chair?"

"Yes..."

"Then stop acting crazy!"

-Reality, sometime later-

Riley sat in her sleeping bag with her trusty laptop, website after website of sci-fi trivia and time travel theory in her collection of tabs.

So far, all she had to show for it. All she had was retreads of what she had already spent several of these time repeats learning: for some reason time was repeating, and everything she tried ended with another repeat starting.

"Just... one answer. That's all I want," Under her breath, the words flowed out. "Just one answer."

A knock on the door jolted her from her thoughts. "Riley? Can I come in?"

"Sure Dad."

Through the doorway came her father, sitting down next to his daughter. His face was one that was tired from the long trials that he faced thanks to the move, but he smiled as "So, first full day in a new city. Pretty exciting, huh?"

"Yep."

"Something tells me you have something on your mind."

"Sure do."

"You want to talk about it?"

"It's... well... it's... complicated."

Dad scooched closer to his daughter, the simple act eliciting a small smile from the 'young' girl. "Try me."

"Dad... I think I'm going crazy."

That surprised her dad, and he mused on exactly how to respond to that...

-Dad's Headquarters-

Dad's anger looked at his men, each emotion looking at the other with a variety of mixed looks. The common theme of confusion was the only common element. "...How do we reply to that!?"

-Reality-

Dad reached out and slid his arm across Riley's shoulders. "Hey, kiddo. I promise, I won't think you're crazy." He gave a small smile. "Well, any crazier than my monkey usually is."

"Dad, you remember that one movie? The one with the groundhog?"

-Dad's Headquarters-

Dad's Fear looked up in alarm. "Sir, the joke didn't work."

Dad's Anger leaned forward. "Alright then. This is serious."

-Reality-

Dad blinked, his smile fading slightly. "I remember."

Closing her laptop, Riley faced her father, clutching at her pant legs uncertainly. "It's... happening to me. And... I don't know why."

-Dad's Headquarters-

"Uh... let's go to Defcon 3... we should we try a joke... again, sir?" Dad's Fear looked hesitant, as Anger was shaking his head.

"No. This is a Code Stoneface. Riley needs us to listen."

-Reality-

"It's... scary being a time traveler, Dad. Scary being alone. No one else remembers, and no one believes me." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Sometimes it's normal. We move, and I go to school, tryout for the hockey team. Like nothing's wrong. Like..." She shuddered again, this one longer, "Like everything is normal except me..."

"Riley..." Dad squeezed her shoulder lightly, but she forged on.

"Dad... I tried to run away back to Minnesota the first time. And then... this happened and I thought it was because I did, so I didn't run away but the repeats still happened... this is me being punished by something? Because I did one bad thing? I don't know, nothing makes sense because I fixed the bad thing by not running away but *I'm still being punished and* ..." Riley broke down into sobs. " *What did I do to deserve this?* "

-Dad's Headquarters-

Klaxons blared throughout Headquarters as Anger worked fast. "Sadness, Joy," he commanded. "Take the helm **now** !"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

-Reality-

"Riley..." Dad ran his hand through his hair, uttering a silent prayer for help. "I don't know... I don't know why this is happening to you. Why you are having to live time over and over. But I know that it isn't because of anything bad you did."

Riley looked up, blinking tearily. "What? But..."

Dad shifted to look her straight in the eyes. "Riley, you are my darling girl. You are always so happy and cheerful, and..." he shook his head, "and I know that... whatever this is... it isn't your fault."

"So... you believe me?"

Dad pulled her into a hug. "Of course I do, sweetie."

"Dad?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"There's more. I... You know how I said that sometimes it's normal?"

Dad nodded slowly, leaning back from the hug. "Yeah?"

"Well... sometimes... it's not. One time, there were zombies... everywhere. I don't... I don't know what happened to you, but... it was so scary and..." Riley cut off, wiping her eyes. "I'm glad it wasn't permanent.

"Another time, I was a guy. It was super strange. And then there was the time with the dancing hippo..." a laugh, one clearly forced, accompanied Riley's doubts. "I know it sounds crazy, like *I'm* crazy, but it's... it's... so...?"

"Overwhelming?"

Riley nodded tiredly. "Yeah, overwhelming."

Dad chuckled. "Yeah. Well, whatever happens, we'll get through it together." He turned and smiled down at her. "Tell ya what, how about this? Tomorrow, we go explore San Francisco, just you and me. You can show me all of the sights!"

"Da~ad."

"What? It'll be fun, having my own pretty little tour guide to show me around."

They both giggled, and then fell into a restful silence. Finally, Dad broke it, running his hand across Riley's bangs.

"And if you ever need someone to talk you, I'm here for you. Even if I don't remember next time, know that I will always love you and support you."

"...yeah. Thanks Dad."

Some things never changed. Riley smiled as she snuggled up against her Dad and drifted off.

Inside Out.9 (blazingen1)

-Reality-

Riley was scanning through the internet for any more information on the strange time repeats. This repeat, almost everything was normal, all except her dad. While he still acted like the beloved father she'd know all her life, this time, he was really... weird, and that was putting it nicely. In fact...

Knock knock knock "Oh Riiiileeeeyy..."

-HeadQuarters-

Disgust and Sadness, the only two Emotions Awake this loop, were at the control panel. Joy was bound and gagged on a chair behind them, with Anger and Fear nearby.

"Oh no, not again," moaned Sadness.

"Ugh, seriously!? This is the third time this week!" exclaimed the annoyed and incredulous Disgust.

-Reality-

"I'm both respecting your privacy by knocking but asserting my authority as your father by coming in anyways."

With that, the door smashed open revealing her dad with a battering ram.

'Yup... very weird,' thought Riley.

Inside Out.10 - (kingofsouls/LordCirce/Blazingen1)

-Welcome-

-Headquarters-

The dimly lit Headquarters was tranquil and empty as Joy walked around. Riley was sleeping, thankfully a sound sleep, and it was just her on dream duty. She prefered it that way, the tranquility of the silence her reward for reaching the day's end. Thought the silence was not only comforting that night; it heralded confusion and apprehension.

Having just became aware of the repeats – which was hard to not notice when Riley was just playing in the park one second and sound asleep the next – Joy was thankful for Riley's current status as asleep. It gave Joy the chance to soak in the atmosphere.

The golden emotion eyed the Memories that stood in their shelves, the spectrum of colors, mostly purple and blue and most holding events she'd seen half a dozen times over, were evidence that Riley's repeating was still going on and causing her undue stress.

Thankfully Riley was a strong girl, able to soldier on despite the strange situation she was in.

The dream playing was a repeat, something about zombie rats and living pants. Without a doubt it was one of the weirdest combinations that Joy had personally monitored, but then again who could blame Dream Productions for wanting to experiment every now and again.

Joy was just about to check on the Core Memories, wanting to make sure they were the same as Riley remembered them the last time Joy had repeated with their person.

Just as she was about to open them, a single firm and irritated "Ahem" echoed throughout Headquarters, drawing Joy's attention towards its source. Standing at the top of the stairs leading to their sleeping quarters stood Anger, who was glaring down at her defiantly.

Cowering behind him was Fear who was shaking like a leaf as he tried his best to put on a brave face. He was failing monumentally, but at the very least he was getting out of his comfort zone and thus got an A for effort. At his sides stood Disgust and Sadness, the green Emotion glaring at her scathingly while the blue one just wrung her hands and stared at her with concern.

"And just what do you think you're doing?" Anger growled acidically.

"I'm checking on the Core Memories...?"

"GET HER!"

To Joy, there were very few things that she would not consider fun. Getting dogpiled was going on that list.

-Reality, sometime later-

Riley awoke inside the car, the scenery blazing past her as Dad drove them towards their 'new' home, yet again. She quickly noticed the blanket that covered her, and realized that she had fallen asleep in the car.

'Honestly' thought Riley, *'Not the strangest thing to happen to me...'*

"Wow, Riley, you slept like a log."

"I *feel* like a log..." As she spoke, Riley's eyes drifted to see where she was, trying to make sense of the unusual situation she was in. Usually the repeat would start just before her Dad announced the move from Minnesota to San Fransisco, but this time she was already in the car and the move already underway.

Weird.

"Well, you were having a hard time staying awake." Mom remarked. "You went back to sleep as soon as we got going."

"Getting up at 5 tends to do that, right monkey?" Dad remarked.

"...oh, oh yeah. Totally."

"Well, at least we're almost there, right honey?"

"Oh you bet. All this driving is killing me."

RIley smiled. At least this time the car trip was mercifully short. Repeating that long car trip every repeat was up there on Riley's personal dislike list, just under broccoli and clowns.

Riley yawned, doing her best to completely wake up as she went over what she was planning to do this repeat – which mostly consisted of practicing her hockey skills and time travel research since anything else just seemed not as important. "So... when are we going to get to San Francisco?"

"San Francisco?" Dad chuckled, Riley raising an eyebrow in confusion. "I wish. Always did want to go there though."

"Wait, we're *not* moving to San Francisco?"

Mom turned around, her warm smile comforting RIley just a little as she tried to make sense of this sudden reveal.

-Headquarters-

Fear did what Fear did best.

Screaming out loud at the highest pitch possible and then breaking into a run through Headquaters like a chicken with his head cut off. "THIS IS A CATASTROPHE!"

"Yea, no kidding." huffed Anger. He flicked his trusty paper **'BREAKING NEWS: WE'RE NOT MOVING TO SAN FRANCISCO! UM... OKAY?'** , trying his best to ignore Fear's incessant screaming.

So far it wasn't working.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME? WE'RE NOT MOVING TO SAN FRANCISCO!? THIS IS BAD, VERY BAD! DOES ANYONE KNOW WHERE WE'RE EVEN GOING BECAUSE I DON'T! OH, RILEY IS IN DANGER, BIG BIG DANGER! TIDAL WAVES, MAD SCIENTISTS, METEORS, ZOMBIES, OR A ZOMBIE TIDAL WAVE CREATED BY A MAD SCIENTIST METEOR! DOES ANYONE ELSE SEE THE INHERENT RISKS OF MOVING TO ANOTHER CITY! THE NATURAL ORDER HAS BEEN DISRUPTED! WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO, I DON'T KNOW WHAT HORRORS AWAIT RILEY IF WE'RE MOVING SOMEWHERE ELSE!"

Anger groaned as he buried his hands into his head to try and block out the ranting. Disgust, on the other hand, simply reached underneath the console – which she was manning – and put on a pair of earmuffs, freed from the living fire alarm that called itself Fear. "Ah, much better." The poking of her shoulder drew her eyes to Sadness, who was also manning the console and trying her hardest to cover her ears from the apparently endless rant.

Fortunately Disgust learned to be prepared, and revealed a second pair of earmuffs, one that was a light sky blue that went well with Sadness's coloring and was just her size.

"Thanks, Disgust."

Disgust, having a hard time hearing exactly what was said, simply gave Sadness a thumbs up.

Anger on the other hand, had enough, and walked towards the console, and calling for a memory to be recalled. In seconds the summoned memory – golden in hue – landed from the ceiling and into his waiting hands. "Here we go."

He turned around, Fear running around in a rough outline of a figure eight. His ramblings continued, going on about something Anger cared nothing for.

With a shout, Anger let lose the memory orb, and it flew along it's path straight and true, and hit Fear straight the mouth, the orb now a temporary muzzle. The sudden impact sent Fear tumbling into the ground, somehow entangling himself with his limbs as he rolled into a nearby wall.

With a sigh and a smile, Disgust removed the earmuffs. "Nice shot, Anger."

"At least I found a use for that dumb gum commercial."

Spitting out the Memory and quickly getting himself free, Fear marched over to the others, clearly enraged. "What was that for?"

"It was to keep you from shouting! Not only does it annoy me, but we really don't want..." there was a moan, and Anger's head began to spark. "...and it looks like you just woke up Joy! Greeeeeeat job."

"Yeah, way to go, Fear. Now we have to deal with Psycho Joy now."

Fear tried his best to slink away. Of all the things he feared, Psycho Joy was the newest one, and was pretty high up there on the list.

Groaning, Fear just walked off to his room, leaving Sadness, Anger, and Disgust to confront Psycho Joy. Upon entering, he walked to the desk in the far corner, where lay all of the emergency plans he had meticulously calculated. Littered throughout the room lay huge piles of papers sitting on the floor in neat stacks. Hanging on the walls were a variety of diagrams, crossed out plans, and tackboards with several yards worth of yarn connecting several places like a giant game of connect the dots.

It was chaotic perfection in the complex simplicity of it. Digging through the mishmash of papers on his desk, Fear riffled through them, and quickly found what he was looking for.

' *Here is is: List of things to do when moving to a new city, version 14.* ' He took the list,which was a fair size with several dozen items on the list, though not as long as his other lists. *"Don't worry Riley, I'm here for you, no matter where we go. I will keep you safe."*

-later-

Phineas and Ferb sat in front of the backyard's lone tree, the summer sun beating on them in celebration of the first day of summer being underway.

The sounds of moving trucks echoed out on the street, and from the sounds of it they were getting closer. "Hey Ferb, did you order anything today?"

Ferb shook his head.

"Let's check it out."

As soon as they stepped out of the backyard, the source of the sound was easy to identify: Two houses down from theirs were

several moving trucks parked on the curb, alongside a station wagon.

"Wow, Ferb, a new family moving next to ours for the Loop! How serendipitous is that?" Phineas grinned, excitement rising as an infinite number of ideas began to form within his mind. Ferb simply gave him a stoic glance. "You're right Ferb, it has been a while since I said that last. Let's go say hi to our new neighbors!"

As they walked near, one of the movers got out of his truck and approached the driver's side of the station wagon. "Alright, Mr. Flanders, where do you want me to start unloading things to?"

"Flanders?" The man who had gotten out of the car looked confused. "We're not the Flanders, we're the Andersen family."

The delivery driver blinked, then checked his clipboard. "Andersen? Andersen, Andersen... oh, Andersen." The driver chuckled. "Yeah, your truck is in San Francisco."

"San Fran... San Fransisco! How... we were following you almost the entire way!"

The two men moved off behind the moving truck, and Phineas glanced at Ferb. "Huh, got any plans for tracking down moving trucks?" Ferb flipped through his notebook, shrugged, then gave a thumbs up. "Awesome. Well, I think I know what we're going to do today." The two brothers smiled at each other, as a faint choir sang in the background.

Ding-Dong

Mrs. Andersen looked up from her cell phone, where she was currently on hold with the moving company. "Now who could that be?" She stood up from the table and walked over to the front door, opening it to find two young boys standing on her front porch.

"Hi! Welcome to the neighborhood. My name's Phineas and this is my brother Ferb. We were wondering..."

"Hello, thank you for holding. How may I assist you?"

Mrs. Andersen jumped as the representative began to speak on her phone. "Oh, hold on one second." She then put her hand over the phone and turned to the boys. "It's really nice to meet you two. My daughter is actually just in the back yard, if you want to go talk to her." She then turned back to the phone. "Yes, hi, I'm... yes, that's me. Yes, I was wondering how the trucks could get so messed up..."

Phineas and Ferb looked at each other and shrugged, before heading around to the back yard.

Riley was... conflicted to say the least.

Moving to a new city – an actual new city this time – was only part of the issue. What frustrated her to no end was that her family's moving truck was not only displaced (an annoyingly consistent occurrence, given how much everything else tended to change), but it was in San Francisco this time.

San Francisco!

Of all the cruel ironic twists that could happen, the one time she didn't move to San Francisco was the one time the moving van got the location right, so to speak.

It was almost enough to make her scream!

And so Riley sat in the backyard, and simply sat in the backyard unsure of what to do or what to feel. She thought she had a general grasp of the repeats, how they worked, but it seemed that every other repeat threw something new at her, something unseen always had to happen, and it caused Riley to rethink how these repeats even worked.

The sound of the backyard gate opening pried her from her latest personal crisis, and Riley glanced up as a pair of boys entered. One had reddish hair and a rather oddly shaped head, while the other was taller with bright green hair.

"Hello. My name's Phineas, and this is my brother Ferb."

"Oh... uh, my name's Riley." Riley waved her hand half-heartedly.

"Cool." Phineas then pointed over his shoulder. "So, we heard your dad talking about how your moving truck is out in San Francisco, and we were wondering if you'd like to come with us to go track it down!"

-Headquarters-

"Um, they've got to be joking, right?" Disgust looked over at Anger, incredulously. "We're like, over a hundred miles away."

"KIDNAPPERS! CHILD KIDNAPPERS!" Fear flailed around in a panic. "I'll admit, when that fear has come up, I never pictured the kidnappers actually *being* children, but still, KIDNAPPERS!"

Anger scowled, before punching out and knocking Fear over the couch. "I don't know, but this is just like the Big Bad Runaway Idea all over again, and I, for one, am not going to stand for it." He began stomping towards the console.

Joy's eyes widened from where she was tied up. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait! Anger, they're just kids, you can't just explode at them!"

Anger spun to face her. "Oh, and I suppose you think we should dance off and play whatever, fluffy imagination games they're cooking up, huh?"

Sadness raised her arms feebly from where she was standing next to Joy. "Wait. I think... Joy is right. I mean, I don't think we should get angry at them, because that will probably just make them sad."

Anger glowered. "Oh, so now you're on Miss Sunshine's side?"

"I'm not on anyone's side... I think."

Voices raised as Anger and Joy continued to debate and were joined by Fear's renewed shouting and Disgust's scoffs at all of the noise. Unnoticed by all except Sadness, the buttons on the console began to flash a rainbow of colors.

-Reality-

Before Riley could make up her mind about Phineas's bizarre invitation, a sudden spike of pain shot through her head, followed by a flash of gut clenching anger, then a spurt of fear. She moaned softly as she pressed her hand to her forehead, feeling kind of like she had just gotten a brain freeze.

"Are you alright?" Phineas asked, looked a little worried. Riley giggled at his face, before a couple of tears escaped her eyes.

"Just peachy." Her voice started as sarcastic, but slipped into a higher, sing-song pitch at the end. It was followed by her gritting her teeth, and then lifting her hand back to her head.

Phineas glanced at Ferb. "Seems like there's some sort of mental weirdness going on. Do you still have the Mind Machine from when we invaded Candace's head?"

Ferb gave a thumbs-up.

"...This can't be real..." laughed Riley as she shifted into an angry growl. In minutes Phineas and Ferb had lead her to their backyard, and had quickly set up... well a thing. The best way to describe the thing was a red sphere attached to a yellow box with blinking lights. Endless cords came from the box and lead to a trio of lawn chairs.

"Well why wouldn't it be?"

'At least someone's happy.' Riley mentally snarked.

Phineas and Ferb were finishing setting up the machine as another friend of theirs got ready to man the machine and keep it from blowing up or any other equally unpleasant outcome. "Hey, Baljeet, is everything ready?"

"Everything is fully functional, Phineas." Baljeet replied. "We are ready to go when you are."

"This is really elaborate for a game." The headache intensified, an intense spike of fear coupled with happiness reflexively drove a gentle hand to caress her aching head. "I'm not really in the mood, though."

"We're not playing. We used this to go into our sister's mind a while ago."

Riley raised an eyebrow, disbelief surging through her. "Right..." Still, another headache stabbed through her head, and she quickly sank down onto one of the lawn chairs, barely noticing as Phineas and Ferb put something on her forehead and then jumped up into the other two.

"Hit it, Baljeet!"

Before Riley could protest, pretty bright colors assaulted her eyes.

-Headquaters-

"Wah!" Fear let out a yelp as he was once more propelled across the room by an punch by Anger, who was currently charging after Joy. In the middle of their big argument, Joy had managed to bunny-hop the chair she was in over and block Anger from getting to the console, which naturally led to him blowing his top. It had also helpfully

burned through her bonds, letting her dart away before the others could dog-pile her again. This had led to the current game of cat-and-mouse, with Anger trying to grab her and her twirling away out of reach. Disgust sat on the sidelines, making snarky comments at both of them, while Fear ran around, still panicking over the craziness of everything.

It was like some dam had burst, and all of the tension and uncertainty they had been feeling about these repeating lives had exploded all at once, unleashing total chaos.

"COME BACK HERE, YOU..."

"No way! I'm not letting you dogpile me again."

"WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!"

"...um, guys?"

"How about kicking you out of the tower then?"

"No way. Riley still needs to have at least some Joy in her life."

"DOOM, DOOM I SAY! And possibly some gloom, too. DOOM!"

"Yeah, but knocking you down a few pegs will give me some joy."

"Guys?"

"Ugh, you're both so immature. And you're making a mess of the place."

"Hey, you guys started it. I was just checking on the Core Memories."

"Yeah, looking to swap them out, probably."

Joy actually pulled to a stop at that. "What? No, I..."

SHREEEEEE A piercing whistle sounded through Headquarters, causing the four squabbling Emotions to stop in place and all clap their hands over their ears. They turned towards the source of the sound to find Sadness, slowly lowering her fingers from her lips, and looking rather bashful.

"Um..." she then pointed towards the viewscreen. "I think something bad has happened."

The four followed her finger, and then gaped as one. The viewscreen, which should have shown what Riley was seeing, was blank, with a few odd static lines running across it. More so than that, the console in front of it was dark as well.

Their animosity forgotten, the scared emotions rushed to the darkened console.

"RILEY!"

-Long Term Memory-

The first thing Riley saw when all the pretty colors disappeared were the shelves. They rose several feet into the air, curving alongside its fellow shelves. And from the looks to it, there were thousands of them as far as the eye could see standing in silent vigil

The most startling aspect were the orbs. The shelves had an endless amount of them, each of varying colors. "Where... am I?"

"We're inside your mind!" It didn't take long for RIley to find Phineas, who was walking up to her alongside Ferb. "I gotta admit, this looks pretty different from Candace's mind."

Ferb shrugged. "Well, not all minds are created equal."

"That's true."

To say Riley was freaked out was an understatement, despite her forced smile that had emerged. "No way, this can't be real. I'm dreaming, right? This is one really big strange dream after eating too much broccoli."

"Well, these look like you." Phineas held an orb, a green one, and inside it was an image. Even as Riley watched, she saw it moving. It was her, at about age seven or so, at a long wooden table. She was eating a plate full of food, and she had just picked up a long piece of boiled spinach. She made a face, then dropped the piece of spinach under the table.

"I... I remember that. That was at my Grandparent's house, I was feeding my veggies to their dog." She blinked. "How can that be here? I mean..." Riley shook her head, which she idly noted was actually feeling a bit better.

Phineas shrugged, handing the memory to Riley as he mused, "I guess it's probably a memory. Candace's were stored as trees, but I think your way is much more efficient." He glanced at the maze of shelves. "Sort of. They're pretty to look at though."

Riley put the memory down in the gentlest way she could, and looked over the wide collection of orbs. They reminded her of snowglobes, only instead of snow it was her life, snipped into pieces and stored in an incoherent pattern. And so Riley browsed the shelves, not saying a single word as she gazed at moment's of her past.

A yellow orb that bore a memory of her at a street fair in San Francisco, enjoying the most delicious pretzel she had ever eaten.

A red orb, the Riley within screaming towards the heavens in anger alongside a blue orb of her consumed by the sadness of being trapped in the repeats.

A green orb of her groaning about the dress her mother insisted on having Riley wear to her first dance.

A purple orb with bits and pieces to her favorite scary movie: "Shoes of Doom".

A blue orb of her in her raincoat, assaulted by an unrelenting rainstorm.

A yellow orb that sat next to that blue orb, featuring Riley dancing from puddle to puddle without a care in the world.

She frowned as she picked up the next one. A red orb mixed with a dash of purple, the memory within one she wished was a forgotten memory.

The roar of a zombie just as it was struck by Riley's trusty hockey stick.

She hated that repeat.

"Hey Riley, did you find anything?" Phineas snuck up on Riley, eliciting a shout and dropping the hated memory.

"Uh... no! No no no no... everything's... great!" She grabbed the memory, forcing it back on the shelf from whence it came. "So... what now?"

"Well, what we need to do is find the source of the headaches," Phineas explained. Riley was starting to get the vibe that he knew a lot more than a kid his age should know. After all, she was in her own mind, all thanks to Phineas and Ferb. If that didn't scream 'genius', then Riley didn't know what did. "The headaches are probably located someplace that's close to your higher brain functions. We should probably head there next and see what's causing these headaches."

Though it was clear Riley was over her head (while somehow being inside of head: Riley decided to stop thinking about it before she got another headache trying to figure that one), Riley smiled, thankful that Phineas seemed to know what he was doing.

"Okay then. So, where do we go?"

"Well I wouldn't know exactly where that would be."

Crestfallen, Riley sighed.

"This is, after all, your mind."

Riley groaned, despair taking its toll as she slumped onto the ground, knocking several of the memories off of the shelves. "I've never been in my own head before! I don't know the first thing about how my own head works!"

"No problem, then. We'll just walk around and explore. Chances are, we'll stumble across it in the middle of a musical montage."

Riley couldn't help but grin from Phineas's awkwardly worded sentence. "Thanks Phineas."

"That's what friends are for, right?"

It then dawned on Riley that their trio had been reduced to a duo. "Um... Phineas? Where's Ferb?"

"Ahem." Riley and Phineas turned to see Ferb standing near the entrance to the row, followed by a large blue... blob. It had arms and legs, and reminded Riley of a slightly overripe blueberry. It was also talking.

"...so you say you need to find the source of the headaches, eh? Well, I don't know about..." it trailed off as it caught sight of Riley. "You... you're... you're her! I mean, you're you, but... what are you doing down here?"

Riley blinked. "I don't know where 'here' is. I mean, they said this was my mind, but that is ridic..."

"You need to be up in Headquarters, I think." The blob looked really confused. "Though, I don't think... I've never heard of... then again,

what do I know? I'm just a Mind Worker." Shaking himself, he quickly gestured for them to follow. "Come on, we're pretty close to the Inspiration Lift, we can get you sent straight to the top." He then headed off.

"Well, you heard the man, er, blob," Phineas said brightly. "Let's go!"

-Headquarters-

"...ohnoohnoohno..." Fear's chant was a continuous drone in the background as the Emotion's crowded around the console. They had quickly confirmed that Riley wasn't dead, luckily, but she also wasn't asleep, or they would have been getting some sort of package up from Dream Productions. It was like she... just wasn't aware.

"I told you, kidnappers! Didn't I? Didn't I?" Fear was pacing and twitching behind them, mumbling to himself as he wrung his hands. Meanwhile, Anger kept pounding at the controls, while Joy was frantically paging through the manuals. Normally, she would turn to Sadness, but after her spurt of bravery in getting the others to pay attention, Sadness had broken down, and was now sobbing into a bucket that Disgust was holding.

"We broke Riley!" she sobbed.

Then Joy jumped to her feet. "Guys, we didn't break Riley, she's fine!"

"Okay then Joy, if she's fine, where is she, huh?" The purple emotion had a good point. Joy fumbled as she tried to answer that. "Ummm... umm..." She paged through the manual. "I think, maybe it's due to, ummm... what's a neuron supposed to be..." she sighed, shaking her head, "I'm not sure exactly, but I think this is just like the time Riley got heat stroke during that summer camp. When the screen went all fuzzy and she almost fainted, only she didn't faint this time."

"So then HOW do we get her BACK?" Anger growled, slapping the controls again.

Joy scooped up the manuals and quickly made her way around to the side of the Viewscreen. "Let's see, lucid dreaming, OBE, subconscious memory... ok, I think if I just... physical senses to sense of consciousness..." Joy quickly began poking around behind the screen. The other Emotions just watched, until a loud crackle sounded and Joy was propelled backwards, away from the screen. Then, with a flicker, the screen restarted, fuzzy with static at first, before growing into focus.

It was a white elevator, with the two boys, Phineas and Ferb standing to one side.

"Where is she?" Disgust looked at the screen, incredulously, absently patting the still hiccuping Sadness on the back.

"Kidnapped!" Fear let out, only to fall silent at a growl from Anger.

"Ow ow ow," muttered a still smokey Joy as she approached the now back-online control panel.

There was a faint ding from the Mind Worker Entrance into Headquarters, then, simultaneously, the doors to Headquarters and the doors of the elevator Riley was in opened.

Revealing the Emotions staring at themselves on the screen, though viewed from the side.

Confusion was an apt way of putting how Riley had felt during the last ten minutes or so. She had apparently traveled inside her own mind, and was now entering what the blueberry man called 'Headquarters'. The doors to the lift opened, revealing a rather neat looking room, with more shelves covered with the memory spheres. Standing in the middle of the room, there was a fancy looking

podium, covered in buttons. Five brightly colored figures stood around it, staring off to a screen on one side of the room.

The moment that Riley stepped into the room, all five of the figures turned to look at her, before promptly letting out a unified scream.

"AAAAHHHHHH!"

Riley jumped at the sudden burst of noise, letting out a loud scream of her own.

"Aaaaaaaahhh!"

"AAAAHHHHH!"

One of the figures, who was bright yellow, suddenly turned and gave the purple guy a push, shoving him away from the controls. "Fear, step back. You're scaring her."

Immediately as he stepped back, her heart rate did seem to settle a bit. Then the purple man began to speak.

"But... how... but... its... it... but... how..." He turned, glancing between the screen and Riley. Riley did the same thing, and then let out a second yell of shock. "Whaaaa?" The image on the screen showed the screen, which showed a screen, which showed a screen...

Riley quickly spun away, feeling dizzy and just a bit nauseous. Behind her, she could hear the yellow woman speak again.

"Disgust, let go of that handle. Everyone, step back. We need to calm down, or Riley is just going to get more upset."

A gruff voice answered, sounding surly. "Oh, so I guess you're going to take the wheel again, huh? Just like always..."

"No," the lady responded. "Myself included. No one touches the console until we've sorted things out with Riley."

There was a bit of muttering, then Riley felt a hand gently touch her shoulder.

"Riley?"

Riley jumped, as the moment the hand touched her, she felt a shock go through her, culminating in a bubbling laugh. She spun around, tripping as she did so, and landed on her butt, staring up at the yellow lady, who had taken a step back.

"What the... what was that?" Riley shook her head. "No, wait. More importantly, who are you?"

The lady took a deep breath, then nodded. "Right..." She then smiled and stuck out her hand. "Hi Riley, my name is Joy."

Hesitantly, Riley reached out and grasped Joy's hand. Once again, the same shock slid through her, filling her stomach with butterflies and laughter. Joy didn't seem to notice, quickly pulling Riley up to her feet, and skipping, pulled her over to the others. She waved at a shorter, blue woman.

"This is Sadness." Riley stuck her hand out without thinking, and, looking a bit surprised, Sadness reached up and shook it. Another shock went through Riley, though this time, it was, well, sad. But, at the same time, there was a feeling of comfort, the sort of release of tension that you get after a good cry.

Joy was moving on, pointing to the green lady in the sparkling dress. "This is Disgust." Riley blinked at the name, which didn't seem to quite fit with the pretty woman, but stuck out her hand again anyway. Another jolt, this one twisting her stomach up oddly, with slight feelings of nausea, but also self-assuredness, or boldness, that caused Riley to stand a bit straighter.

"Then there's Anger." The short red man stuck out his hand, giving her hand a firm shake. This time, the jolt brought with it a sense of rage, but also excitement, the sort of rush that Riley felt when she

was barrelling across the ice in hockey. Her lip twitched up in a grin, which Anger matched.

"And finally, Fear." The taller purple man twitched slightly as he shook her hand, and Riley could feel her feelings of nervousness take a quick boost, but underneath that, she was startled by a massively strong feeling of protectiveness.

Riley stepped back, her head reeling slightly from the intense feelings she had just felt. The five figures crowded together slightly, and Joy spoke up again, gesturing with her arms. "We are your emotions."

Riley waved, awkwardly. "Um, hi, I guess. I'm Riley...but I guess you all know that." She laughed awkwardly, and the group of emotions mirrored her. She rubbed her arm. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, but they all seemed to be jammed up into her throat. She opened her mouth several times, then closed it again.

The awkward silence was broken when Fear leaned over to Joy and whispered, "Do you think now would be a good time to talk about the whole deja-vu thing?"

Riley blinked. "Deja vu? You mean the time travelling?"

Unnoticed by the group, Phineas and Ferb looked at each other, eyes widening. "That's it!" Phineas stated boldly. Riley jumped and looked back at him, and the emotions peered around her as well.

"What's it?"

Phineas grinned. "I think I know what you're going through. We actually have a song to explain it!" He turned to look at Ferb. "Ferb, I'm going to need Introduction Song Number 5."

Ferb gave a thumbs up, then squeezed his eyes shut. With a pop, a music player appeared in the air in front of him, which Ferb caught. He then hit play, causing a gentle melody to begin playing. Phineas

stepped forward, holding a microphone he had pulled out of somewhere, and the lights in Headquarters seemed to dim a little bit as he began to sing.

"~Have you ever thought tomorrow happened just yesterday?~"

"~Have you ever thought your life was moving in the same way?~"

Riley nodded quickly. "Yes, exactly!" Behind her, the Emotions murmured slightly with excitement.

Phineas grinned, and the music shifted into an upbeat tempo, the lights brightening.

"~Then you're Looping! Looping over and over, my friends!~"

"~Looping! And so summer will never end!~"

"~So many adventures! So much to do!~"

"~So many new people to meet, and it's all happening to you!~"

- *Reality* -

Candace frowned as she sat up in her bed. "Hold on, Stacy. My busting senses are tingling. Got to go." Hanging up, Candace raced to her window and leaned out. "Ah-ha! I knew it. You guys are... taking a nap." Candace stared down at her brothers, who were laying on some vaguely familiar lawn chairs in their backyard next to some girl she didn't recognize. From this angle, she couldn't see the Mind Machine, hidden by the tree branches. "Well, that's not bustable. Though I wonder what happened to Isabella?"

- *Headquarters* -

"~It's a wide Multiverse out there, hung on an interdimensional tree.~"

"~So many new things to share, and wondrous things to see.~"

The Emotions and Riley were sitting, eyes wide, as they listened to the musical story about why these time loops were happening. The Emotions were doubly confused, given the fact that several Mind Workers had shown up and joined in with the musical number, as had Rainbow Unicorn, who was doing a tango with a random zebra.

Then, the music changed, shifting to a more downbeat tempo. The lights cut out, and then a spotlight shone on Phineas.

"~But not every~y~y~thing is rosy. There's trouble i~i~i~in paradise.~"

"~Yggdrasi~il is broken, and so.. we are... re~peat~ing our LI~I~I~IVES!~"

Silence reigned for several seconds, before the song came back, more upbeat than ever, and the lights flashed on to reveal a massive stage that had somehow spontaneously appeared in Headquarters. The stage barely fit, taking up most of the space in front of the Viewscreen, which was now displaying some psychedelic colors to match the song. A massive ensemble of Mind Workers and random other characters none of the Emotions or Riley recognized stood on the stage, dancing around, including what looked like a living old-timey bathing suit, a small white doll in a pink hood, and a floating baby head.

"~And now we're Looping! Our lives will begin again!~"

"~Looping! And doing it with a new friend!~"

"~We have so much to tell you! The Ping and the Pocket!~"

"~So much to build! A rollercoaster and rocket!~"

"~So much to do, and time moves so fast!~"

"~Though it will begin anew, let's make each moment last!~"

"~As we Loop with You!~"

The song finished with a grand flourish, with everyone pointing towards Riley.

Joy was the first to recover, and she quickly began applauding. Riley joined in, and the other Emotions soon followed, though Sadness' claps were rather half-hearted. Phineas jumped down, as the Mind Workers began breaking down the stage and carting it away.

"Thank you, thank you. So, do you have any questions?"

Riley exhaled. "So many, but... first, what was with the floating baby head?"

Phineas shrugged. "Honestly, we have no idea."

While the musical number was enlightening (and catchy, much to Disgust's frustration), Phineas and Ferb decided that explaining what wasn't explained in song was the next course of action.

What followed was an incredibly elaborate presentation that more or less explained everything. It helped that they were inside of Riley's mind, so they could get the materials they needed in an instant, rather than having to make them, which saved them "a couple minutes or three", according to Phineas. Given that holographic projectors, tiny animated figurines, and a dizzying array of flipcharts was involved, Riley wasn't sure she believed him.

After that, Riley sat with her emotions as Phineas and Ferb decided to just stand back and let the new Loopers sort the revelation out amongst themselves. RIley soon found herself sitting on a nearby couch, and noticed a newspaper lying on it. She picked it up, and stifled a snicker. The paper was labeled 'The Mind Reader', and in big bold letters was the headline **"RILEY INSIDE RILEY'S MIND? POSSIBLE PARADOX DETECTED!"**

The letters then quickly morphed into **"BREAKING NEWS! WE'RE NOT CRAZY!"** .

To say it was surreal was an understatement.

And so the six sat down,and swapped the stories that they had to tell. By far, Riley's favorite was the one Joy had experienced without any of them, at a magical castle. But as the stories were swapped, Riley had one question she needed answered. "So, you all have been there since the very beginning..."

"You betcha!"

"So, what the heck was going on the first time we moved to San Francisco?"

Joy's smile dropped, and the other emotions glanced around uneasily.

"...it was my fault," Sadness spoke up from her seat, staring at the ground. "Something changed, and when I touched some of the memory spheres, they turned blue and wouldn't turn back."

"No, Sadness," Joy interrupted. "It wasn't your fault. It was mine." Joy turned to look at Riley. "All your life, I've done my best to make sure you were happy, even at the expense of pushing the other emotions away."

"...understatement of the year..." Anger muttered. Disgust elbowed him and gave him a pointed look, to which he just rolled his eyes.

Joy nodded. "So, when you were moving, you... well, I guess you should have felt sad, it was natural for you to, but I stood in the way, so I think it kind of built up in Sadness, and got let out when she touched the orbs. Of course, I panicked, especially when she touched some of the Core Memories, and, well, long story short, Sadness and I got sucked right out of Headquarters and down into Long Term Memory, over by Hockey Island."

Riley smiled a little at the mention of her favorite sport, and Phineas and Ferb, who were chatting with a couple of Mind Workers, glanced at each other after overhearing the word 'Hockey'.

"So, Fear, Disgust, and Anger were trying to hold down the fort while we were away, but... well, they didn't have any experience making you feel joy, and..." Joy trailed off, not sure how to bring up the next bit.

Anger let out a huff. "Then I had a really dumb idea. Ya see, what Joy didn't tell you was that all of your Core Memories got sucked out with them, so your Islands of Personality were all out of whack. That's why you couldn't play hockey or seem to connect with your friends. So, I had the *brilliant* idea that, since all of your Core Memories were made in Minnesota, that you should head back there to make some more."

Riley's eyes widened a bit, as she remembered how she had thought about how much happier she had been in Minnesota and had seized on the idea that if she went back there, things would be better. "So you made me get the bus ticket?"

Anger scuffed his foot. "Well, not really, I mean, I gave you the idea, but then, it got stuck, and we got locked out. We couldn't make you feel anything, it was like you were emptying out." He then pointed back at Joy and Sadness. "That's when they showed back up, when you were on the bus. Sadness managed to pop the idea out, I still don't really get how, and then she pushed you to get back home."

Riley turned to look at Sadness, who was fiddling with her fingers. After a couple of seconds, she realized they were looking at her, and let out a small 'eep', before speaking. "I just kind of did it. I mean, I thought about what you were going through, and about how you needed support, and stuff. And that's what we do, most of the time, is support you, and help you to live a good life. And even if my parts aren't as nice as Joy's, I'm still here to try and help you." She waved her hand at the others. "We all are, no matter what. And we make mistakes, because we're still learning along with you, but... we do it

out of love." Sadness gave a small smile, which Riley returned, and the group lapsed into a gentle silence.

With was then quickly broken by Joy.

"GROUP HUG!" Joy then jumped out of her seat like a rocket, and glomped her host befor Riley could protest. The warm feeling was nice, almost in intoxicating, and Joy motioned to her fellow emotions. Sadness was the first to join, accepting Joy's invitation as the yellow emotion opened up a spot in the hug for her. One by one Fear, Disgust, and Anger followed, and the six embraced one another.

The same jolt she had felt before came, with a dizzying mix of emotions pulling every which way – joy, sadness, disgust, fear, and anger all hitting her at once, but under it all, a simple truth filled her.

Throughout the repeats, she had always felt that she was alone, never truly able to find someone who could understand. But now she knew, she had five little voices, who understood what she was going through. They were with her, always, and would stick with her till the end, and even if they weren't Awake, they would still be there for her.

And in that single moment, Riley realized that her emotions were not just emotions. They were not just people in her head that watched over her. No, her emotions were more than that. They were her friends.

They were family.

"Riley?" Sadness asked. "Are you... okay?" Tears fell from Riley's face, as she looked at Sadness with a warm smile.

"Yea. I'm okay. It's just," Riley paused, all eyes on her. "I'm home".

DONG

Riley looked up as a sound came from the machine in the corner, which had been quietly pumping out little memory spheres as Riley

had listened to Phineas and Ferb's explanation. A shining sphere popped out and began to roll down the track, and the emotions quickly jumped up and ran over to the track.

"It's a new Core Memory!" Joy explained, as Riley walked up behind them.

Riley blinked, then nodded. "Those are the memories over in the center, right? The one's that are important?"

Joy nodded, even as she leaned in to look at the sphere. At first glance, it almost looked like it was clear, but when you tilted your head, you could see a red tint, then a green, then yellow, and so on. A rainbow of colors seemed to swirl, just under the surface, bleeding into each other in a swirling pattern, and in the middle, the scene of the emotions gathering for a hug displayed, Looping over and over.

The orb dropped into a channel beneath the floor, glowing as it slid around to the Core Memory Plinth. The other Core Memories shifted, but rather than take a place in one of the circles of memories, it slid into the very center of the pillar, a small dimple forming to reveal it in the middle of the circle on the floor.

Then, light seemed to spill out of the sphere, washing through Headquarters in a rainbow display of light. Everything that it touched seemed to get a bit brighter, the room seemed to get a bit bigger, then the light shot out of the window. The emotions raced over, looking down, and gasped, pointing and whispering. Riley made her way over after them.

"What's happened? What did it do?"

Disgust was the one to answer. "Usually, one of those Core Memories will make an island over there", she pointed across the deep chasm below, to the cluster of islands floating near the other side, long thin rails linking them to Headquarters, "but this time, the new island is down below us."

Disgust pointed down, and Riley leaned over to press her nose to the glass. Down at the base of the Headquarters tower, she could see that a new island had formed and was spreading out at the point where the tower linked with the rails to the other islands. Numerous statues had appeared down below, with what looked like a statue of her forming right next to the base of the tower.

"Is... is that bad?" Riley asked, hesitantly.

Disgust shrugged. "I have no idea.'"

Fear gazed at the island below, notably not afraid of it like he was with every other new thing that he encountered. "So... what do we call it?"

Joy then looked at Riley, suddenly felt all the attention in the room fall on her. She stared down, at where the light from the new island was spreading down the connections to the other islands, turning them into bridges.

"Unity Island. Because it shows that we are all in this together."

The emotions looked at each other, then turned back, smiling, and nodded at Riley.

"So... now what?" Fear asked.

Ferb coughed, drawing all eyes to him. "Well, you do still have a truck in San Francisco."

-Later-

"Look, mister, how many times to I have to say this: *We are the Flanders, not the Andersens!* " Mr. Flanders screeched at the movers, anger rising in both voice and facial tone.

"Hey buddy, this address is on the sheet." The mover argued back, waving his clipboard. "What's written on the sheet is where we go."

"Oh, so what am I supposed to do huh? Just stand here and wait for our moving van to just drop out of the sky?"

Honk, honk The Flanders' moving truck then suddenly dropped out of the sky. He then looked up, just in time to see a bullhorn that falling from the sky as well. Startled, he managed to catch the bullhorn, then stared up at where it had come from.

Above the urban sprawl of San Francisco was the strangest airship he had ever seen, a bizarre mix of a brightly colored blimp and a wooden airplane, with rocket boosters and at least a dozen propellers. Its cabin was more like a hanger as seen on an aircraft carrier.

Leaning over the railing of the flying machine were four children, three boys and a girl. Through another bullhorn, the girl spoke to the two men below. "Uh, excuse me? This is the Flanders' house, right?"

Mr. Flanders fumbled for a second before replying through his horn. "Uh yes...who are you?"

"I'm Riley Andersen. My parents and I moved to Danville, but somehow we got your truck and you got ours, and me and my friends are here to switch them."

Mr. Flanders blinked, his mind not quite believing what his senses were telling him. "Well, at least *someone* here is doing a good moving job."

The mover just shrugged at Mr. Flanders' scathing remark, before he turned his attention back to the blimp thing above him. "Not to sound ungrateful, but aren't you and your friends a little young to be flying blimps and moving trucks?"

"Uh... Yes. Yes we are."

The mover nodded. "Oh. Okay. Truck's all yours, kid."

The green haired kid then pushed a button on a remote, and a claw emerged from their flying machine, reaching down and gently clamped onto the truck, before swiftly lifting it up into the waiting skyship.

"Thanks!" The girl called.

The blimp ship then took off, flying off into the wild blue sky. Mr. Flanders and the mover then looked at each other, not really sure what to think in regards to what they had witnessed. "Uh... Mr. Flanders? What did I just see?"

"I don't know, but I know I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"So, what's next?" Riley was back in Phineas and Ferb's backyard, the day after they retrieved the moving truck. Weirdly, the adults had all brushed off the weirdness of the truck just magically showing up, but Phineas has said that was normal.

Phineas grinned at Ferb, who held up a rolled up blueprint. "Well, we were thinking you might like to take a look at a little sport we invented, named Hockey Z9."

Riley grinned as she walked over, glad to know that she wasn't on her own, anymore.

Joy hummed to herself and smiled as Riley looked over the plans for the new game. Anger was at the console, hooting and grinning over all of the changes, especially the polar bear, while Fear was going through minor conniptions over the same. Disgust was moaning about the disaster that was the outfits that had been used in the game, but Joy saw her working on a few daydreams about possible costume designs.

With a twirl, Joy spun around Sadness, who was deeply engrossed in one of the Manuals for the new, expanded console that Phineas and Ferb had helped set up, complete with Telepathic Telecommunication, so that they could speak with Riley without her having to visit. Ferb had assured Joy that the console would show up whenever Riley was Awake.

Awake. Joy liked that term. Riley was Awake, and so were the Emotions, and they were ready to have whatever these Loops could dish out. After all, Riley knew about them now. What could happen?

Inside Out Loop Footnotes by kingofsouls

IO.1) Welcome to the Loops Riley/Riley's Head!

IO.2) Man, the Mind Workers have either really good timing or really bad timing.

IO.3) You know you're good at Stealthing, Looping or otherwise, when one of the Original Seven can't find you.

IO.4) IT'S ME.

IO.5) Wow... way to keep your priorities straight Disgust.

IO.6) Zombies. There will always be zombies.

IO.7) That's right. Bing Bong LIVES!...somehow.

IO.8) Parents; they are always there to shed light onto the darkness, even if they are not sure if they understand or not.

IO.9) You could say this Loop is Fairly Odd. *lol*

IO.10) Oh wow, this one became huuuuge. But it was fun to work on.

Mega Man: Inside Out - Epilogue

"So..." Athena crossed her arms when she and Hephaestus were finally alone in his office. Slenderman had eventually escaped, partly due to overzealousness on the parts of Tama and Madoka creating an escape route for him. And Hephaestus himself had called off the chase. "After everything that happened; blatant trespass, Administrative espionage, intent to destabilize multiple Anchors, and resisting arrest; would you mind explaining why we aren't marching straight to the Justice Gods and asking for a warrant? Janus isn't likely to keep quiet about this unless we can give him a good reason. Not to mention that our little hunt wasn't exactly discreet."

"For one, the trespassing charge isn't likely to stick," Hephaestus showed Athena the message from Zeus on his monitor, causing her to curse under her breath, "especially after what we did manage to do to him is taken into account. By the same token, the espionage charge is shakey."

"Which could call into question our right to arrest him in the first place," Athena sighed, "especially since 'dear old dad's' little stunt, well-meaning as it was, could be interpreted as an invitation. What about intent to destabilize?"

"If we could prove that's what he was doing, then all of the rest would be incidental given the current state of Yggdrasil," Hephaestus nodded. "Unfortunately, that exact point is why I don't want to make a big deal out of this. Here, take a look."

The forge god tapped a few keys and called up a series of reports to the screen. Athena looked at them for a few moment, her eyes widening the longer she looked them over.

"This is... A stability *increase* ? After what he tried to do?"

"Certainly not what he intended, I'm sure, but results speak a lot louder than intent, especially now. If you'll forgive me the analogy, it's a lot like forge work. Putting materials under controlled stress can make them stronger if you do it right–"

"–or shatter them if you don't," the Olympian strategist nodded. "Don't forget, I've actually paid attention when you talk about your work. So if I'm reading this right, then twice now Slenderman has tried to stress Anchors in your Loop to the point of breaking–"

"–only to strengthen them in the long run when he fails," Hephaestus confirmed. "I think you can see why I might want to keep this quiet."

"Yes..." Athena's lips pursed in deep thought. "You don't want Nidhogg to learn about this."

Nidhogg, the complementary/contradictory divine organization that traditionally opposed the Admins, also known to some as Tartarus, Isfet, and several other ominous names. Composed of what mortals knew as demons, giants, djinn, evil gods (including many of the Titans), and other types of unsavory divinities; they were the formal organization that oversaw the spread of destruction and ruin through the multiverse, a necessary balance when Yggdrasil was in full operation, but also one that many of its members took... undue joy in carrying out.

They were also in something of an official truce with Yggdrasil's Administrative organization, agreeing that more destruction was not what all of creation needed at the moment and had agreed to not only refrain from stalling repair efforts but also, reluctantly, aid them when needed.

If their organization was to learn that such a blatant attempt to destabilize multiple Anchors had actually resulted in an increase in long-term stability, not once, but *twice* , then there was going to be a political nightmare on that front. Yes, the increase was ultimately from said Anchors triumphing over adversity, and that group did adversity *really well* , but all it would take was one overzealous divinity and a bout of misfortune and...

"You can't sit on this forever, you know," Athena sighed. "The first time could have been easily written off as a fluke, but now others are going to wonder. If something like this happens again–"

"I know," Hephaestus admitted. "Once could be an accident, twice *might* be coincidence, but three times or more is a pattern. The next time he tries something like this, and I'm certain there will be a next time, everyone is going to demand answers and I'm not sure I like the implications mine will give them."

"Nidhogg's already putting pressure on us to allow more 'villainous' loopers, blatantly hinting that having a few as Anchors would be better for Yggdrasil's current state, and word is that they've been petitioning for the right to handle some of the 'darker' Loops directly. When this gets out, all of that is only going to get louder."

"I know."

"I don't think I can really hide this either. The rumor mill is already going to have a field day with our little chase earlier."

"Tell everyone he tried something, failed, we overreacted in typical Olympian fashion, dragged a few others along with us, and it's too much trouble to follow up on," the Olympian smith grunted.

"'Dear old dad's' not going to like how that paints us," Athena noted wryly.

"'Dear old dad' can kiss my bum leg," Hephaestus snorted.

"I'll be sure to tell him that," Athena grinned, before sighing heavily. "I still don't know what to tell Janus, though. He was talking about demanding constant surveillance on the Inside Out branch of the Disney Cluster in case of a repeat. Considering how thin we're all spread, someone's going to start an investigation if he keeps that up. Why do I always have to be the one with a level head?"

"Because you're at your most stunning then?"

"You of all people should know exactly how far flattery goes with me," Athena replied flatly.

"It's not flattery, it's fact," Hephaestus smirked. "But how about I be your level head this time? Give Janus a choice, he likes those. He can pursue constant surveillance over one small, recently activated branch like he's saying and draw a lot of scrutiny. Or he can put in a much more low-key request for assistance with his ever-growing workload. Considering he's trying to run almost the entire Disney Cluster on his own, no one will bat an eye and he can divide up the workload however seems best should it be granted. Plus, since there's been talk about increasing inter-pantheon cooperation, if he asks for non-Olympian assistants then the request will probably be fast-tracked. "

Athena considered the plan for a moment, and ultimately concluded that it was sound, well thought out, and probably what she would have come up with anyway. Olympian pride be damned.

"You're not bad at the level-headed thing yourself when you put your mind to it," she admitted.

"Oh, really?" Hephaestus raised an eyebrow. "What were you saying about flattery earlier?"

"It's not flattery, it's fact," she tossed his own statement back at him. "If I wanted to flatter you, I'd say you were the perfect god to lead the Olympians."

"How is that flattery?" Hephaestus asked in confusion. Considering the past and current holders of the title, it could easily be taken as an insult in his opinion.

"Because," Athena walked over to the office door and opened it, coyly tossing the remainder of the line over her shoulder as she left, "there's no such thing as a 'perfect' leader."

Hephaestus blinked for several long moments before turning back to his terminal. "I will never understand that goddess..."

Divine Level of Reality: Shoggath-Chan Message Boards

(Note: The following has been helpfully translated from R'ylehian 1337 and the proliferation of vulgarities filtered out for your convenience)

Daddy'sLittleEldritchHorror: Oh geez, have you guys heard what Slendy did this time?! He actually broke into an Admin office!

I'mWithStupid-: What?!

[CENSORED]: NO [CENSORED] WAY!

-I'mWithStupid: STFU!

Daddy'sLittleEldritchHorror has posted a video (Video is of Slenderman running head-first into the chest of a tanned beach-going Hephaestus flanked by three beach-going Valkyries in chainmail bikinis)

Shaggoff: *Is distracted by hot Valkyries*

[EXTRACENSORED]: Welp, I always knew Slendy had his head up his own [Censored]. Looks like it's gonna be literal now. Think if I broke into an Admin office they'd do that to me?

[EXTRACENSOREDWITHCHEESE]: Dude, come on over to my place and I'll do that to you for free.

[EXTRACENSORED]: Promise?

ForAGoodTimeCallCthulhu: Nah, he gotz away. But then thiz happenedz!

ForAGoodTimeCallCthulhu has posted a video (Video is an endless loop of Slenderman getting run over by a steam engine)

LOLMi-go: Slendy can haz train wreck? LOLOLOLOLOLOLOL

Shaggoff: *Could watch this all millennium*

TentaFun has posted a video (Video displays a prone Slenderman getting shot in his buttocks by Madoka's magic arrows)

[CENSORED]: ASSUME THE POSITION!

[EXTRACENSORED]: OH YEAH! Give it to me baby!

[EXTRACENSOREDWITHCHEESE]: Please ma'am, may I have another?

TentaFun: I no, rite? Magical Girlz are da best!

MoreHeadsMoreFun: Full of vitamins and nutrients!

TentaFun: Thatz a wazte of gud magical girlz!

HeComes has logged on

HeComes: Hey guys, wh

LOLMi-go: Brreeep! Newb alert! Brreeep! LOLOLOLOLOLOL

HeComes: at's up?

[CENSORED]: OH GAWD GTFO NEWB! STOP TAINTING US WITH YOUR NEWBNESS!

[Extremely long string of abuse and profanity removed]

HeComes has logged off

Shaggoff: *Relieves himself on the door to ward against newb return*

MoreHeadsMoreFun: So what the hell was Slendy doing in an Admin office anyway?

F-Tang: o o?

F-Tang: A e, y ooa ae a oe...

Shaggoff: *Calls the witchdoctor*

ForAGoodTimeCallCthulhu: Hold on gaiz... Theze videoz were totes music worthy!

ForAGoodTimeCallCthulhu has posted a video (Video is a remix of Mr. and Mrs. Andersen fighting Slenderman with hockey sticks set to the Baka Song)

Shaggoff: *Cannot breathe due to laughter*

LOLMi-go: LOLOLOLOLOLROFLCOPTEROMGWTFBBQ!

ForAGoodTimeCallCthulhu: Wait til you gaiz see tha other one! Just gotz to get tha angles right...

Sl3nd3r1: I hate you all...

LOLMi-go: Slendy waz on?! LOLOLOLOLOLROFLCOPTER!

Daddy'sLittleEldritchHorror: Pfft. Slendy never actually logs off.

Janus sighed. Athena had had a point, damnit, and he'd made his choice. He'd stick with it. Didn't mean that he was thrilled about it. Honestly... he'd never worked all that much outside the Olympians before the Event and even now his interaction was limited.

Of course, part of it was that he'd been expecting a prompter response. He respected the importance of choices, but he also preferred that they be made quickly when presented.

"Oy? You Janus?" a gruff voice cut into the (literally) two-faced god's thoughts.

He looked up, and didn't see anyone. Just a big poof of tangled hair sticking over the end of his des–

"Down here!" the voice bellowed, and Janus stood up to get a better look at the short figure, and promptly wished he hadn't.

The dwarfish god was the ugliest he'd ever laid eyes on, his face possessing mismatched eyes, a thickly tangled and unkempt head of hair and beard that evoked the image of creation's scruffiest lion's mane, bulbous misshapen nose, pockmarked face, and a wide grinning mouth with large misaligned teeth stained yellow (but otherwise clean he noted). His body was short, squat, and so hairy it appeared apelike. His hands were disproportionately large with thick calloused digits and the clothes he wore, looking like some demented Scottish policeman complete with kilt, had the rumpled appearance of having been worn for a couple of days.

Janus sniffed noticeably. Even if he made Quasimodo look like a supermodel, at least whoever it was *smelled* clean.

"Name's Bes," the dwarvish god's grin widened (47). "I'm with tha Netjer, or tha Egyptians if yer bein' lazy. Also got some ties with tha Afrikaans and tha Mesopotamians. I hear you're lookin' fer some help."

"Um..." Janus wracked his brain for an excuse, "I'm certain you're... qualified... but you aren't quite what I'm looking for."

"You think I'm ugly, don'tcha?" Bes grinned accusingly.

"Well..." Janus thought for a moment and decided not to deny it. "Yes."

"HAH!" Bes laughed, making Janus jump in surprise. "Least yer honest! Most gods'll try and be all 'diplomatic' about it! As if I wasn't proud a' bein' voted tha ugliest god ten eons straight and counting! My wife has no complaints and that's good enough fer me!"

Janus just stared as Bes handed him a resume.

"You're from the Justice department?" Janus blinked in surprise.

"I'm tha equivalent of a mortal beat cop these millenia," Bes shrugged. "Good work, mostly scarin' troublemakers like those Mythos hacks offa whatever mischief they get up ta, but I'd really like ta work closer wit' tha mortals iff'n I'm honest. Got a big soft spot fer 'em. So when I heard through tha grapevine ye were lookin' fer some help after one a' them Mythos creeps tried somethin' wit' one a' yer Anchors, I grabbed my resume and ran over."

"And what can you do about the Mythos Hackers?"

"Why, I can put on my ugly face!" Bes chuckled.

"Your ugly...? I don't believe you."

"Pfft... Ye think this is ol' Bes's ugly face?" the dwarvish god laughed. "This is nothin'! Why, I regularly send demons crying home to mama and tha last time I caught any of those Mythos nuts skulkin' around, I made each and every one scream like a little girl!"

"Sorry, not seein–"

"BOO!"

"*SSSSHHHHRRRRIIIIEEEEEKKK!*"

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Bes fell to the ground with booming belly laughs. "That wasn't even close ta my best either!"

"Okay!" Janus squeaked after a few minutes. "You're hired! Just please don't *ever* do that again!"

"No promises!" Bes chuckled, getting to his feet. "Ye never know when ye might have to scare troublemakers off after all!"

Janus didn't reply.

"Ye can let go a' tha ceiling light now."

"Okay class," Riley's teacher spoke up loud and clear, "I'm sure you all know that the senior trip is coming up in a few months."

The Loop with the Lights had kept going, looking to last at least through high school, and possibly longer. (48) Riley had kept up with the experiments, spending a good portion of each day with one of her emotions 'taking a back seat' as it were to see if they could somehow influence her without directly manning the console. The results, slow as they had been in coming, were surprisingly positive. None of them could influence her at anything close to full strength, but Riley had started noticing some recognizable twinges from her 'off-duty' emotions between thirteen and sixteen. (49)

"What you may not know is that this trip is being sponsored, in full, by Light Labs."

"Wait, what?" Joy latched onto that fact in an instant, and as a result the teacher now had Riley's full attention.

"They have agreed to provide transportation for the entire senior class, provided that everyone going receives parental permission and can meet the health requirements," the teacher continued, passing stacks of paper listing said requirements. "Due to the nature of the trip, you will all be required to turn in a health form signed by your physician certifying that you are in good health. This is not optional if you wish to go. Yes, I am repeating myself. I know you all too well."

Riley looked over the health requirements. They didn't seem too bad, really. Pretty standard if she remembered her last doctor's visit.

"Let's see... blood pressure, check," Fear began comparing the memory to the list Riley was reading. *"Heart rate, check. Vision, check. Able to withstand at least 3gs of force for several minutes?"*

"Where are we going?" Disgust piped up from the back of Headquarters, having drawn the short straw today. *"The moon?"*

Riley had repeated the question before realizing she was doing so.

"As a matter of fact," the teacher smiled, "yes."

Mega Loops 19

Mega Loops 19

AN: The Mega Man: Inside Out chapter has now been updated with denouement, commentary, bonus content, and epilogue!

19.1 (me with an addition by wildrook)

"I have an army!"

"You also have a scheduling conflict."

Loki blinked. "What is that supposed to mean?"

The wall suddenly exploded and there was an elderly balding irate man in a yellow and blue flying saucer glaring at Loki with pure fury.

"Do you have *any* idea how hard it was for me to book this week for my latest attempt at world conquest?!" the man raged. "That an upstart like you would seek to cut in line before the great Dr. Wily is an insult of the highest order!"

"I am a god, you pitiful mewling mortal!" Loki seethed viciously.

"Then you and your third-rate army will yield fascinating information when I dissect you all for SCIENCE!" the man yelled back. "ROBOT MASTERS: ATTACK!"

'Still hard to believe the guy's not a looper,' Tony mused as events descended into complete chaos.

After the beat-down, Bass smirked at the downed Loki.

"Puny God," he said, the last to leave the room.

Loki gave out a whimper.

19.2 (GammaTron)

"So let me get this straight..." Caboose looked at Axl, who was replacing Tucker this Loop, "You can copy the looks of other robots any time you want?"

"That's the gist of it, yes," Axl noted, "You know, I don't see why..."

"Wa~it for it..." Church and Roll–who was replacing Tex this Loop–held up a finger.

"Huh?" Axl looked at the two.

"So that makes you...a Sugar Robot Lover," Caboose figured out, causing Axl to gasp and gawk, unable to figure out a response.

"There it goes," Church snickered.

"Well, it...it's true," Roll snorted back a laugh, "Y-You...You could make a *lot* of cash i-if you-hoo-hoo..." she fell over, laughing, "Sugar Robot Lover! Ah-hahahahahaha! Y-You da ho! Heeheeheehee~!"

"It-It's not funny!" Axl snapped, blushing heavily under his black and teal armor, as Roll started kicking the air in laughter.

"Don't let Sister know that you can do that, otherwise she'll be trying to pay you to turn into all kinds of things," Church advised, causing Roll to laugh even harder in the background with Caboose joining in.

"I don't get the joke," Caboose stated the obvious for him.

19.3

"I'm sorry Zero," X told his friend, looking at the all-too familiar sight of the red reploid cradling the inoperative body of his girlfriend Iris.

"Not your fault X," Zero admitted. "You tried your best..."

Colonel angrily brushed off the aid of his soldiers as he stormed into his quarters. Repliforce had been exonerated of all Maverick charges, and the real culprit behind the incidents brought to justice in a joint operation by Repliforce and the Maverick Hunters. It should have been a cause for celebration, but...

He waited until the door slid shut.

"The cost was too high..." he growled, before unleashing his fury on the walls of his own quarters, each heavy blow imprinting a large dent in the thick metal walls.

His sister... The gentle light of mercy to balance out his militaristic nature. The one individual who could rein him in when he started going too far. Because what was a great hero without restraint? Where was the mercy that would stay his hands when the battles were over?

Gone.

Dead.

Because of X.

His eyes hardened. X. The source of everything that had gone wrong with the world in the past decade. The tumor that needed to be cut out of existence for his crimes, intentional or otherwise. Along with all who stood with him.

Part of Colonel realized that his thoughts were those of a Maverick, the very thing he was sworn to fight.

But the half of his soul that cared had already been buried.

19.4

Zero felt a tug on his leg and glanced down to see the familiar form of Alouette.

"Did you want something?" he asked.

"Are you going to marry mommy and be my new daddy?"

Zero's mind and body froze at the question. No matter how many times he encountered variants where Ciel formally adopted the child reploid rather than becoming a surrogate big sister, he would never get used to the way they liked to blindside him with awkwardness.

19.5

"Oh, not you guys," Blues pinched the bridge of his nose as he got a good look at the group that had just shot at him and his team.

"Well, if it isn't the famous Proto Dunce and his team of Dumb-files!" a sleazy voice called back. "Been a while, hasn't it? We haven't thrown down with you since the Eggman-Wily war!"

"Who are these guys?" Jolyne asked. "And why are they working with President Valentine?"

"Nack the Weasel and his partners Bark the Polar Bear and Bean the Dynamite Duck," Blues replied. "They call themselves the Hooligans."

"Hey, Valentine pays well, and he likes our slogan!" Nack smirked back at the Exiles. "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap!"

19.6

Zero stared down the grinning figure of Fighting Fefnir, the crimson reploid hefting his twin jawed hand cannons (literally), Sodom and Gomorrah as he stared straight back.

"You're as good as the legends say you are, Zero," Fefnir admitted. "But I'm no ordinary reploid who relies on a single class of ability. I've studied the ancient and honored art of heroes older even than yourself."

'Oh, maker. X, what did you tell them this *time?'* Zero wondered as he braced himself for anything.

"You," Fefnir declared as he aimed one of his jawed hand cannons at Zero, the weapon opening its jaws and reconfiguring itself into something Zero couldn't immediately identify, "are looking at Neo Arcadia's modern master of JAN! KEN! POW!"

Zero raised his Z-saber high to defend against the sudden barrage of... office paper?

Had he been closer to the source of the blast, the sheer volume might have knocked him off his feet, but as it was it was merely obscuring his vis–

Zero dropped to the ground before a giant pair of shears that the storm of paper had obscured could make him about two feet shorter, and rolled to the side out of the way of a sizable boulder that followed.

'Rock, paper, scissors... Cute... Real cute...'

19.7

Blues blinked as he Awoke in Light Labs and looked around.

It looked...

It looked exactly like he'd remembered leaving it so very, very long ago in the baseline. Except a little more up-to-date. A little more lived-in.

The Loop memories hit and Blues realized that in this timeline he'd never had a faulty power core. Never gone through the events that led to him running away. There had been some strain in the initial testing that had led to the military ordering the usual less-advanced Joe units but...

There had never been a falling out between him and his father.

"Blues, could you come here for a moment?" Dr. Light called from another room.

He's going to–

The red raider shook off the dark thought and spent a few moments pondering the request versus taking off until his curiosity got the better of him. No matter what his usual problems with the man were, they'd never happened here. He could keep himself under control for at least one Loop. Long enough to see where this went.

He walked to another room where Dr. Light was waiting next to another robot connected to a diagnostic testing machine awaiting activation. A female model similar to Roll, but... with black hair and a black-and-blue dress that could have come straight out of the 1920s Swing era.

"This is Rhythm, son," Dr. Light explained. "She's your sister unit. I built her to help out more around the lab. Particularly with..." Dr. Light patted his stomach, which had grown larger since Blues had come online, "...my eating habits. I appreciate your help on the matter, son, but I really should be having a more balanced diet and you were

never intended as a nutritionist. And we both know I'd try to live on instant ramen and takeout if left to my own devices and Albert's not any better. Anyway, with her assisting you, Dr. Wily and I can begin in earnest with the industrial line of Robot Masters..."

Dr. Light continued explaining, but Blues's mind had wandered off to a different area of thought. Was this what would have happened if he'd never left? Would Rock and Roll have never been built? Or was this just a strange variant where his father had simply gone in a different direction prior to their construction? And what would it mean for the Loop if–

Dr. Light flipped the switch to activate Rhythm and th3-L00|o=[R $43|)...

19.8 (OathToOblivion - Admin Shenanigans)

It was rare for Hephaestus to step out of his office these days. Looking after the Megaverse was a full-time task, after all. But even so, sometimes you just needed to get out and stroll.

...Okay, he was hungry, that was all. As he stepped into the Admin cafeteria, he noticed that it seemed a bit frosty today. Not literally, though. Last time that had happened, *dearest dad* had had a conniption, although that might have been because his porn was frozen then shattered.

No, it was readily evident that the reason was the lone girl in pink, eating alone at one of the tables as almost everyone ignored her. Hephaestus sighed. This again, huh?

Picking up his lunch, he immediately went over to where the girl was. "Hello, Madoka," he grunted, plopping himself into a seat.

Kaname Madoka, for it was she, started as she saw that somebody had sat with her. "Oh! Hello, Sensei," she greeted sullenly.

Hephaestus swept a hand out at the crowd of other Admins in the room. "They still have problems with you, I see. You shouldn't let them get to you like that."

"But it was my fault what happened. I didn't even mean to, but I did," Madoka whispered.

The Greek Inventor shook his head. "It wasn't your fault. If anything, it was the fault of your Loop's original Admin for not patching that Karmic Destiny thing properly," he pointed out.

'...Actually, come to think of it, who was *her Admin?'*

"Yo, Hephaestus!" a voice rang out. Turning, Hephaestus and Madoka both saw Hermes speed up and plop down into a seat with his own lunch.

"Hermes. How have you been?" Hephaestus asked.

"Eh, well enough. Heard you got X and Zero off the ground recently. Syncharitíria, and all that! That also helped me pull some lost code out of the ether for Sonic and his crew. They've got a whole other major Variant to play with now!" the Winged Messenger announced.

"Another? How many does that Branch even have?" Hephaestus asked incredulously.

Hermes shrugged. "Honestly, too many. Even with baseline restored, they still get way too many Variants and Fused Loops than normal. I've been meaning to find a way to fix it, but..." he shrugged again in a "what are you going to do?" manner.

Hephaestus frowned. "Let me take a look at it next time I have a moment, you might have missed something."

"Um, excuse me," Madoka bowed, before getting up to go get more food. As soon as she was out of earshot, Hephaestus asked the question that had been on his mind lately.

"By the way, Hermes, you wouldn't happen to know who Madoka's Admin was, do you?"

Hermes blinked, before growing serious. "No, actually. Most of the others give her grief, but quite honestly it was that idiot's fault for letting the bunny-cat's system even give her enough energy to Ascend."

"And yet, we haven't heard anything about them being punished. Strange, don't you think?" the Greek God of the Forge pointed out.

Hermes frowned. "You think they skipped out? In the middle of this crisis?"

"It's only a theory, but..."

"But it's really likely," Hermes finished, knowing where the train of thought led. He looked around surreptitiously, before leaning in closer. "All right, I'll look into it. Won't even charge you for it, since this is serious business. Whoever it was skipped out while everyone's backs were turned. Even if it was with the best of intentions, we have an AWOL Admin, and that's a big no-no, these days."

"I appreciate it, brother."

19.9

"Zero?" X wondered. "Is something wrong?"

Zero stared out over the central atrium of Hunter HQ, staying silent for several minutes.

"I... kind of thought you'd be happy Iris was alive this Loop," X continued.

"I am," Zero sighed. "It's just... has she seemed kind of... *off* lately?"

"She's probably in mourning," X said, reminding Zero that even if Iris had lived this Loop, her brother Colonel hadn't.

"Yeah..." Zero admitted.

Iris smiled at the other navigators as she returned to her duties. They said that it was a miracle that she'd survived the incident at all. That her systems were not meant to handle the full original program matrix, the one that had needed to be split to become her and Colonel. They gushed over how romantic it was that her life was saved by Zero, her love. They offered condolences over the death of her brother.

What did they know? Did they know the emptiness inherent in the absence of a connection so innate its very existence hadn't been noted until it was gone? Did they know the pain of trying to reach across that connection for a comforting presence that should have been there, only to find a void? Did they know the suffering of losing the other half of their own soul?

Did they know what it was like to look upon that love they gushed over and judge him responsible?

How many of them realized that her smile was false? How many of them guessed that her drive had died with her brother? Did any of them even suspect?

"Hello, dear sister..."

*"Who *sniff*? Who's there? Colonel? Is...*sob*... is that you?"*

"No, dear sister... Not Colonel... Not Colonel at all..."

"Why...?"

"I do apologize... I hadn't realized Dr. Cain had made more reploids... Your dear big brother Sigma would have gotten in touch much sooner if he had...!"

And could any of them comprehend what had taken its place?

19.10 (me, with add-on by Hubris Plus)

Lex Luthor laughed as he stood over the defeated Justice League in his latest battle suit. It had taken months of planning, but he'd found all of their weaknesses and exploited them masterfully.

The kryptonian went down first, inflicted with a bioengineered kryptonite-infused bacteria Luthor had developed and was on his deathbed last he'd heard. The speedster had been a bit trickier, but after figuring out how to block his connection to the Speed Force, the 'fastest man alive' became no more threat than an ordinary man. The so-called Green Lantern had been far simpler once Lex had learned that his powers required concentration. A simple psychotropic and his own teammates had turned on him to prevent his fight against non-existent demons from destroying the city. The martian only needed fire to counteract, but Lex had gone the extra mile to get a hold of some rather nasty new invention that had left the alien in critical condition. The most difficult had been the amazon, and he'd needed to delve into the occult to find something appropriate, but there were plenty of beings with ancient grudges against the Greek Gods she followed that had been happy to offer their services. After that, using an experimental weapon to dangerously dehydrate the king of Atlantis had just been showing off.

As for the dark knight? A simple computer virus had just rendered everything actually dangerous in the man's arsenal more of a threat to him than to Luthor himself. As a bonus, it had also taken down the latest member of the League entirely.

"Seriously?" a voice he hadn't expected to still be capable of speaking interrupted Luthor's moment of triumph. He whipped around to see the blue-armored robot, the 'Mega Man', not only not incapacitated by his virus, but seemingly unaffected at all. "I'm a freaking *robot* . The virus thing is, like, the third most common attack people use on me. Right after shooting and electromagnetic pulses. Did you honestly think I wouldn't have a decent firewall in place?"

Lex blinked. He thought he'd accounted for any potential firewall...

"You did, didn't you?" the blue robot slapped his face with his hand. "Lex Luthor thinks he's the most brilliant man in the world. Like I don't hear *that* all the time. Seriously, I'm thinking of listing 'fights despotic egotistical geniuses' as my hobby. Admins know I don't have all that much time for anything else."

Luthor scowled. Time for plan B. He used the neural interface to activate the tactical EMP burst, and blinked again when the robot remained unaffected.

"Yes, the EMP," the robot sighed with rather well-emulated exasperation in Luthor's opinion. "Been there, done that, dad won't let me out of the house without several layers of shielding since the Ra Moon incident."

Luthor's scowl deepened and he readied his energy weapons. There was always the old-fashioned way and he'd designed this armor to match the kryptonian.

"And now the shooting," the robot sighed again as he almost casually sidestepped each shot. "Honestly, I'm tired of this. Mirror Buster."

Luthor's gauntlet-mounted energy weapons were suddenly destroyed by his own reflected energy blasts.

"I suppose I should be thankful everyone forgets how dangerous I really am," the robot continued as he met Luthor's chest-mounted

laser with some manner of flash grenade that blinded the armored human. "Frankly, I don't like violence in general, I like hurting others even less, and for all the fighting I end up doing I still consider myself a pacifist."

Luthor growled and made to charge, only to find that his boots were stuck to the ground with some sort of industrial-grade adhesive. As he began straining to free himself, the robot continued speaking.

"But the fact is," the robot glared at Luthor, "I *am* dangerous, I *am* strong, and when people like you decide to use force for your own selfish ends without regard for the rights and safety of others, I *will* respond in kind."

Luthor tore his boots free and used his jets to propel himself forward as he threw the mightiest punch he could manage. The robot sidestepped the first pass, but Luthor felt the tell-tale bump of a clipped impact. Ignoring the warning his armor flashed that an unauthorized source had scanned his systems he doubled back for another attempt and increased his speed. This time Luthor struck head-on, except that instead of obliterating the azure upstart like he'd expected, he found his charge swiftly grinding to a halt, the robot's metal feet digging deep furrows in the street, as the robot caught the punch in one hand.

'Impossible!' Luthor's mind balked at the event. *'My armor halted by the invention of some third-rate crackpot less than half its size?!'*

"I'm the Mega Man," The robot glared as his hand flexed enough to buckle the armor on Luthor's gauntlet, forcing the man to stifle a cry of pain as the pressure stopped just short of crushing his hand. "And you're just another name on a long list."

"Is is just me, or do *all* of the boyscouts get this scary when you wind them up?" Flash asked, following the arc of Lex's powersuit as it tumbled out of the city limits and plowed a furrow through the earth.

"I told you to beware the nice ones," Batman noted dryly.

19.11) (masterofgames)

The warp pad in Doctor Light's lab lit up as Rock rematerialized. The moment it had finished, he started running full pelt to the workshop area, ripping off his helmet and tossing it aside. "Dad! Is Roll okay? Please, tell me her IC chip is intact!" he pleaded as he burst through the door.

"Well, I have good news, bad news, and interesting news." Doctor Light sighed, placing a hand on Rock's shoulder comfortingly. "The good news is, her chip is fine." Doctor Light couldn't help but smile slightly at the look of relief on Rock's face. "The BAD news is, her body was so badly damaged, that it's a total write off."

Rock slumped in depression. "But... you can rebuild her, right?" he asked hopefully.

"Well, that's the interesting bit. I don't have to, because she asked me not to."

"...Pardon?"

"When you first got your combat parts, Roll was so worried about you that she started trying to design a combat chassis of her own. It... wasn't very good, to put it bluntly." Doctor Light explained, typing away while he spoke, directing a few robotic arms to place Roll's chip in a slot in a sealed capsule in the center of the room. "When I saw it, I knew that wasn't going to stop her from using it to help you, so I made her promise to stop developing it, on the condition that she let me design a more reliable one for her." He continued as the capsule started powering up. "She agreed, so long as she got to name it. I did inform her that it was misspelled, but she she insisted it was needed for the acronym." he shrugged. "Anyhow, she made me

promise that if anything happened, that I would use the project as her new body, be it to restore her, or save you."

With a few rapid beeps and a blink of a large green light on the door, the capsule slowly slid open, releasing a cloud of coolant vapor. "She really looks up to you, you know. She insisted on the color scheme." he grinned as Roll emerged in her new body. A little over a foot taller than Rock, long blue hair, wearing blue and white armor with combat heels, far more adult looking than her old childish body, and holding a chain gun nearly as large as she was in each hand, she stepped up to stand before them with a knowing smirk. "Rock, allow me to present the Kombat Operation System - Multiple Ordinance Support unit."

Rock just groaned and palmed his face. "KOS-MOS... great. And this was going to be such a quiet loop..."

19.12

X and Zero were in an intense debate about what to do regarding Sigma when they both Awoke, blinked as Loop memories set in, and looked themselves over.

"X..." Zero broke the silence first, "why are we lions?"

"Well," X began, "I suppose it has to do with the divergent evolutionary history of this particular Loop leading to a sapient felinoid population as the dominant species, which in turn caused said species to develop its robots with matching body types and basic capabilities, leading to–"

"I'm going to choose to take that as 'I don't know' and change the subject."

19.13

The room blinked as the respawned fighters stumbled back in.

"A double KO? But... The Hub...?"

"Well..." Rock rubbed his head sheepishly, "I may have cheated a bit and saved one last Black Hole Bomb just for that last exchange."

"You also went heavy on the sonic attacks..." Astro Boy pounded his ears like he was trying to regain function in them. "Seriously... Ow..."

"I also like to do my research when I can," Rock shrugged. "Something like 'ridiculously enhanced auditory receptors' was begging to see if you had equal dampening capabilities."

"You made my butt-guns *backfire* ," Astro Boy accused.

"You were just surprised that I countered with quick-drying concrete rather than staring at them in stupefaction," Rock smirked. "Like I said, I did my research. Come on, Astro, Hub lore says I was based on you. Did you think I *wouldn't* look you up when I had the chance?"

"Yeah... but... I'm so much stronger and faster than you are!"

"And, what? You think that makes you unique? Astro..." Rock laughed and slung an arm over his fellow robot hero's shoulders. "Practically every serious foe I've ever faced has been stronger than me, or faster, or more powerful, or all of the above. From the average robot master, to mechanical eldritch abominations, to universal class doomsday weapons. And it's never been about how strong I am. It's always been about how I use the tools I've been given."

"Huh...? Aw... nuts... Those guys in the Hub made the match more like one of *my* fights..." Astro realized.

"And I decided for the Loop match to make it more like one of mine," Rock grinned.

"Still... how'd you know I'd charge straight into that Black Hole Bomb you saved up at the end?"

"Astro..." Rock shook his head. "I hate to say this, but you are *such* a Shonen hero sometimes..."

19.14

A very female X, looking for all the world like an adult Roll rather than an adult Rock, tried to keep as straight a face as possible as she watched her red-faced friend retreat from the armory.

"Not one word out of you, X..." Zero grumbled.

"Now, Zero, you know I have to ask why you were going into the *ladies* armory," X surrendered her face to the assaulting grin. "As commander of the Hunters, I do need to be sure there's nothing illicit going on."

" *You* try going fifty Loops straight as the opposite gender!" Zero growled out. "See how many of *your* habits get scrambled!"

"Fif..." X did some calculations in her head. "You were female during the perversion virus outbreak? Huh... You really don't look that different in your armor, you know that?"

"Please stop reminding me about that Loop..."

"Anyway," X shrugged, "if you want me to know how it feels I could talk to my older sister next time we have a Loop together and set something up."

"What does Roll have to do with you being a girl?" Zero blinked, his blush receding in confusion.

"Apparently everything," X admitted. "Every time I've been female, Mega Woman has been considered history's greatest hero rather than Mega Man."

Zero sighed. "As opposed to my creator who probably flips a coin as often as not..."

19.15

Zero had to wonder if Yggdrasil hated him sometimes. He was in the middle of a strange fused loop with Rock and Roll's era where he was the human son of Dr. Wily, and even worse, it was some stupid Harem Variant. Iris was the tsundere childhood friend, Layer was the stoic "big sis" figure, Ciel was the shy, book-smart one, Leviathan was the tomboy, and X was the gay choice.

Thank Hephaestus that the latter was Awake.

Currently, the six were all at the local pool. Zero was trying to stay out of the girls' way, which led X to try and speak with his friend.

"Hey, you okay?" X asked.

"Oh sure, I'm fine. Never mind the fact that my girlfriend along with most of the other girls I've interacted with in baseline are obsessively trying to get my attention, and are all willing to hurt me whenever I do even the least implicating thing possible, oh no, I'm just fine."

"Are you still mad about the washing machine?"

Zero glared at his friend, "NEVER. Mention. The. Washing. Machine."

X simply raised his hands in defense, "Don't get mad at me. You usually don't let loops get to you this much."

Zero sighed. "I know. It's just..." he paused, "why does this happen to me? I keep getting transformed, or I get hurt or insulted or embarrassed. It's like Yggdrasil is using me as a punching bag. And this loop, I get Iris, but she's nothing like her baseline self."

X shrugged, "That's not true. She's still really protective of her brother."

"Not the point. Maybe I'll just go hide elsewhere for this loop."

"That doesn't sound like you, Zero. You're not someone who would let the world bring you down like this. Besides, who said you needed to play along with the loop? Try and make the girls understand that you want to be friends or something."

Zero raised his head. "Yeah. You're right. You hear that, tree? I will not be your b***h today!"

Yggdrasil took offence.

Zero then walked off towards the girls unaware of the fact that he stepped on a full water bottle. The water bottle then burst, sending its cap flying. Bouncing around the pool, somehow not losing momentum at all, it finally slammed into a nearby cup that was holding chopsticks for some reason. While most of the sticks simply fell, four of them shot towards the four girls.

Zero, blissfully unaware of what was about to happen, called for the girls. The four turned towards him, just as the sticks proceeded to pierce the backs of their swimsuits.

Zero couldn't bring himself to look away, as the four bikini tops fell in unison. The girls, upon realizing what had happened, immediately covered themselves to retain some modicum of modesty.

Zero panicked, immediately saying that it wasn't his fault, which only served to remind the girls that he had a full-frontal view. Flames surrounded the enraged girls, each pulling out a weapon of choice.

Leviathan pulled a harpoon, Layer had a frying pan, Ciel had a wrench and Iris had an electrified mace. Together, the embarrassed girls came down on him with cries of "PERVERT!"

"Oh dear," was all X was able to say.

Rock and Roll were currently relaxing in the lab of their home.

"How do you think X and Zero are doing?" asked Roll.

Before Rock could respond, an earsplitting scream spooked him, one that sounded a lot like Zero.

"That can't be good," said Rock.

19.16

Clark Kent smiled to himself as he walked into the Daily Planet. It was a new year, full of new possibilities and–

"Hey, Smallville," Lois Lane smirked as she sashayed up holding that morning's edition. "See the headline yet? Superman stopped the Toyman from wreaking havoc in New York last night."

"Really?" Clark did his best to feign ignorance. Regardless of who knew his secret identity, it was good to keep in practice. "I hadn't heard about that. I turned in early last night."

"Sure you did," Lois gave Clark a knowing gaze and thrust the paper into his hands. "Feel free to read that and kill a few minutes before Perry gives us our assignments.

Chuckling, Clark walked over to his desk to do exactly that, and nearly did a spit-take when a particular fact about the paper caught his eye. It could have been easily missed by anyone, including him, if

they hadn't been paying attention but his eyes had just happened to land there.

"Lois?" he called after his girlfriend. "Why does the date on the paper say 'Wilyday, January first'?"

"Uh, because it's the first of Janu–" Lois stopped suddenly. "Did you say ' *Wily* day'? As in *Dr.* Wily, the mad scientist who's always harassing that poor Mega Man kid?"

"Yes," Clark nodded, turning the paper so the printed date was clearly visible to Lois while he fiddled with his computer. "Right there on the front page. And on my computer. Looks like even the internet thinks this is Wilyday instead of Friday. Apparently Friday's tomorrow. It seems the bad doctor just made an eight day week all over the world somehow..."

19.17 (DrTempo)

From The Journal of Sunset Shimmer:

I've gone metal this Loop. As in, I'm made of metal. I'm called Sunset Woman here, a creation of one . Shortly after my 'activation', tried turning me to his side when he snapped.

As tempted as I was to just kick his flank by going all-out, I'd remembered Blues telling me that Wily was 'Dreaming'; he's never truly Awakened, but seems to retain some knowledge of past Loops, if only like they were dreams. Reminds me of how I first saw my Loop memories why back in that fateful first Fused Loop.

In practice, that means he does tend to use said fragments of memory to change things up. I even heard he even managed to beat up a certain Bureau, even getting past their anti-tech defenses.

The first one of THOSE Loops I have, I'm going to enjoy tearing the Bureau apart...

But back to the events of this Loop. After I escaped, Rock and Roll arrived to save me, only to see me Keyblade in hand.

Turns out Blues was here as well, and he explained my story. From what he said, there'd been a Fused Loop with Equestria recently... if Blues remembers right, it was shortly before he met me. is curious as to why I'm Looping anyhow... You and me both. Hopefully, Twilight'll have the answer.

Rock said to sit this Loop out, and try to relax. I really can't. Guess I've become the kind of person who can't really stand by and watch evil win.

But I understood why they wanted me to sit things out: and his Dreaming. Anything I might do could make things tougher in later Loops.

I actually pity Wily in a way. I do sympathize with his wanting recognition, but the ends never justify the means.

As the Loop went on, I was patient, but I never liked it. I could've done something to help...

I also feel bad for Rock and his Loop...they were nearly erased from ever even existing.

As this Loop ended, I'm starting to see what Loopers must go through as the Loops pass...

19.18

Sunset Shimmer groaned as she tried to shake the static out of her hair. Waking Up after the whole Fall Formal demoness incident was

never all that fun, especially as it repeatedly reminded her of what kind of person/pony she used to be. Still, the incident served to introduce magic to the alter-Equestria which gave her an opportunity to try and figure out how it worked. She could only lament the fact that she'd forgotten how much she loved doing field research until recently. So many lost opportunities...

If only the magic of her friends, the alternates of the Elements of Harmony and the members of The Rainbooms band in this reality, didn't keep finding amusing ways to zap her when she tried to take readings.

"I give up..." she moaned from where she'd allowed herself to collapse on the floor while the Rainbooms began band practice away from the instrumentation she'd set up. "I'm no closer to knowing how magic works here than I've ever been..."

"That easily?" a male voice that Sunset wasn't used to intervened in her thoughts, reminding her that she had a pair of visitors this Loop. Something she normally didn't. Visiting loopers usually ended up in Equestria with Twilight and the others.

"Do you have any idea how many times I've run tests like this, only to end up zapped, splatted, defenestrated, and otherwise humiliated?"

"Watching you cough up a puff of rainbow smoke *was* kind of funny," a female voice admitted and Sunset snorted in amusement despite herself.

"Yeah, well, thanks for helping me out, Rock, Roll," Sunset sighed and sat up, trying to brush herself off as she looked at the twin loopers. "Have I mentioned how glad I am to meet you again?"

"A few times," Rock grinned.

"At least you didn't ask us to autograph your copy of *Daring Do and the Curse of the Magi* again," Roll grinned. (*) "Or any of the other

books written about that Loop."

"Sorry about that by the way," Sunset blushed. "It just sounded so impressive when I read about it the first time. Ahuizotl, Tirek Sunstar, Discord, Waltz, the Dark Mane, King Sombra," Sunset trailed off and her expression turned somber, "Dr. Wily subverting the Elements of Harmony..."

"Um..." Roll hesitated on seeing Sunset's guilty expression. "That wasn't in any way your fault, you know."

"Yeah," Rock agreed. "You weren't even part of that Loop. What Wily did with the Elements and their bearers had nothing to do with you."

"Maybe..." Sunset hugged herself. "Maybe not. After all, I was the one villain in the baseline who successfully subverted an Element of Harmony, however temporary. I can't help but feel that the possibility itself is tied to that event."

Rock and Roll remained silent and exchanged glances with each other.

"You know what your problem is, Sunset?" Roll asked, getting a look from the other girl. "You give up too easily."

"What?"

"Yeah, especially on yourself," Rock nodded as he dialed a number on his phone. "Hold on. Hi dad, yeah I'm at school with friends. Look, we've got a budding researcher here who's so frustrated with a lack of results that she's ready to give up the whole thing. Uh-huh. Yeah, Sunset Shimer. You remember her, right? Studying magical manifestations. They happen while playing music. Gotcha. See you soon," Rock ended the call. "He'll be right over."

"Uh..." Sunset blinked. "How soo–"

A door suddenly slammed open, startling Sunset as well as the Rainbooms from their practice. Silhoetted in the doorway was a stout bearded man in a labcoat, holding several rolled-up charts and wearing stylish shades. Dr. Light had arrived.

"Um... doesn't that door lead to the band closet?" Pinkie expressed the band's collective confusion.

"I come in the name of SCIENCE!" Dr. Light declared, pointing dramatically.

"How?" Sunset wondered incredulously.

"Remember how we told you that dad studied Pinkie Pie's abilities that Loop while Unawake?" Rock whispered. "Well, after we last met, he Dreamed up the research one Loop and set about replicating them."

"Again, how?"

"Why, with SCIENCE! dear girl!" Dr. Light declared from behind Sunset, making her jump several feet into the air.

"That makes no sense!" Sunset accused upon landing.

"It makes perfect sense!" Dr. Light returned, striking a pose. "After all, what is SCIENCE! if not study? What is it if not the power to stare into the unknown and declare that it shall be made known? To seek out the shrouded mysteries of existence, present youself before them and say 'teach me!'? To unravel the secrets of the cosmos with neverending wonder, marveling at each new tidbit of knowledge they give up, and persisting no matter if the research takes a day or a lifetime? Or, indeed several lifetimes? The drive to ask questions of the unknowable and transform it into the known! *That* is SCIENCE!"

The room was silent for several beats as six of the eight students gaped in astonishment at the man.

"Dude!" Rainbow found her voice first. "Did you *actually* just make *studying* sound awesome?"

"Sheeeeooooooot..."

"Is it wrong that I suddenly have the biggest schoolgirl crush on your dad?" Sunset whispered to Roll while blushing crimson.

"I wish I could say this was the first time that happened," Roll sighed.

"Now, head researcher Sunset," Dr. Light continued, causing the girl to jump at the address, "I believe you were studying the manifestation of magic through music?"

"Head researcher? Me?" Sunset blinked in astonishment. "Er... I mean, yes, but all the readings I took just blew up in my face. The instrumentation can't get any clear reading."

"Well, then, we start with observation of the phenomenon then," Dr. Light proceeded, unperturbed. "Perhaps ask questions of the subjects afterwards about how the manifestation feels."

"Well..." Fluttershy responded quietly, "it does feel kind of warm and nice, like being hugged by lots of cute fluffy bunnies."

"Mine rather feels like a walk down the runway while wearing the most fabulous dress," Rarity added.

"The satisfaction of a hard day's work," Applejack nodded.

"And," Dr. Light stopped Sunset from writing those down by placing a gentle, but firm, hand on Sunset's notepad, "do not forget to include all known subjects."

"Huh?"

"Dear Sunset," Dr. Light chuckled, "I was there at the battle of the bands. I saw you undergo the very same phenomenon you are trying

to study. How the magic works with you is as relevant to this research as how it works with them."

"Yeah!" Rainbow shouted, holding up Sunset's guitar. "Get up here and pony up with the rest of us!"

Sunset looked between the Rainbooms and the visiting loopers for a few moments, before giving in to the emotions of the moment and joining her friends.

"Alright! One... two... one two three four!"

*) See My Mega Pony: Season 1 for details of the events that take place in the book.

19.19

Sherriff Jack Carter had seen a great many things in his time as the head law enforcement official of Eureka, a town that could best be described as the 'mad science capital of the world'. With all the government involvement, secret organizations, end-of-the-world threatening accidents, reality bending, and general wackiness that implied.

And that was *before* the whole thing with the Loops had begun. Before his years between arriving in Eureka for the first time and the imminent birth of his second biological child were set on perpetual repeat (and, yes, he frequently wanted to rage at the heavens to let his son/daughter be born already!), bookended by he and Zoey literally passing themselves on the road out, only for him to Awaken in the car driving into town back in the past. Reality clearly had a sense of humor, but the joke was getting old as far as he was concerned.

So far, he hadn't lived through the same set of events twice. Heck, that was true even in his baseline after traveling through time (long

stories). His Admin, Enki, had explained it being due to his branch having 'a tendency towards high variance' or something along those lines when he came down after an event now known across the Loops as 'The Crash'. What it seemed to mean in practice was that certain events he remembered from his baseline may or may not happen any given Loop, with some being more frequent than others, and familiar mad science capers could be the result of any of dozens of related or (seemingly) unrelated events. Sometimes he swore the universe just flat made stuff up solely to screw with him.

Bottom line: Assume nothing, no matter how familiar it might seem.

Like the guy walking into town right now. The timing, gait, and the fact that Carter hadn't seen him in town yet this Loop suggested one particular individual that Sherriff Carter was familiar with. Certain aspects of the individual's appearance suggested something rather different.

"Hey, Carl?" Jack spoke up to the empty interior of his armored jeep. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but that doesn't quite look like Callister Raynes, does it?"

"No," a harsh computerized voice emanated from the jeep's dash. "Callister Raynes is not prone to wearing shades, brightly colored scarves, or styling his hair in a pompadour in any variant so far encountered."

"Didn't think so. Let's go introduce ourselves."

Introductions had been much simpler than Jack had anticipated, which was fine by him. As had getting the stranger to agree to join him and Carl at a special table outside Cafe Diem. Special, because Vincent, the cafe's proprietor, had designed said table to accommodate AI-capable automobiles like Carl along with additional more human-sized guests.

The stranger had seemed skeptical of the fact that the cafe had no menus, boasting that it could make any dish for any customer. He'd dropped the incredulous look when Vincent had come out with a Connecticut-style steamed cheeseburger for Carter, a can of 10-W40 oil for Carl, and a blue can with a large 'E' emblazoned on the side for the stranger himself.

"How in...?" the stranger examined the can from several angles in astonishment.

"I've stopped questioning Vincent's ability to serve anything a long time ago," Jack replied. "So, going out on a limb here, I'm guessing that you're a visiting looper."

Getting a nod, Jack continued.

"I'm also guessing, from the general timing of your arrival in town, that this Loop you're a first-generation human-like AI invented by Nathan Stark, only something went wrong and you had to leave town."

"That's a pretty good guess."

"Well, you seem to be replacing a guy from our Loop named Callister Raynes, though I doubt that's what you're called this Loop."

"Right. Blues Right. Because the Loops have a strange sense of humor sometimes."

"You're telling me," Carter agreed readily right before he spotted his female deputy storm up. The one who often had a relationship with Callister Raynes before he left. Oh boy...

"You remember what I said would happen if you ever came back?" Jo Lupo; military-trained Eureka deputy, fellow looper, and four-star hoplophile; growled at Blues.

"I do," Blues nodded and stood, turning to face the woman and calmly accepting whatever punishment she deemed fit to unlea–

Jo Lupo enveloped Blues in a fierce hug.

Jack stared in astonishment. As did many other people at Cafe Diem.

"...Not that I'm complaining, but I'm sure you said you were going to blast me into the next county or words to that effect."

"Don't tempt me," Jo growled. "At least you had the decency to say goodbye, unlike *some* people..."

"You mean Raynes...?" Blues asked as Jo released him and they both sat down.

"No..." Jo's gaze hardened.

"So, anyway," Jack cleared his throat, "Blues, this is Jo, she's my deputy and a fellow looper like Carl. Jo, this is Blues, he's replacing Callister as you've clearly noticed. Now, back to our original topic, what brings you to town Blues?"

"Adventure? Romance? Just visiting?" Carl ticked some common possibilities off.

"Desperate service call for degrading systems?" Jack added in Callister's typical reason.

"Following rumors of a shadowy organization who are trying to exert control over scientists," Blues supplied.

"Any chance you could narrow it down a bit?" Jack prompted. "Almost the entire town is scientists, usually of the 'mad' variety to one extent or another."

"...Actually, I'd better tell you about my home Loop first. With a reputation like that, you're going to play host to my real dad, Dr.

Thomas Light, and his best friend/arch nemesis Dr. Albert Wily sooner or later."

"Let me guess, the latter likes to try and take over the world?"

"Yep."

"Oh joy," Carl deadpanned. "More new and exciting ways to get blown up."

"You seem remarkably blase about the things that happen around here," Blues noted, dusting himself off from the latest 'happening'.

"Yeah, well, after your first few doomsday scenario repetitions," Jack wiped his forehead, "you learn a few important things whether you want to or not."

"Like what?"

"Like carry an ordinary pocketknife at all times," Jack pointedly folded up the item that had been instrumental in saving Eureka this time. "You'd be amazed how often that comes in handy."

It had taken several months of planning and maneuvering, along with some of Jack's remembered hints about common factors in his Loops, but Blues had finally managed to confirm the identity of a member of the organization he was tracking, known as The Consortium. One Beverly Barlowe, psychotherapist and owner of Eureka's one and only 'Bed and Breakfast', with a rather salacious emphasis on 'bed' for both occupations.

Beverly currently struggled against ropes tying her to a chair and Blues paced around her, the otherwise empty room lit by a single bulb.

"You don't know what you're doing!" Beverly hissed. "The technology being created here is dangerous! It needs to be controlled! There are things mankind is not ready for, and this place is given far too much freedom with them!"

Blues sighed. "I've encountered far too many groups who thought that controlling human knowledge was 'in humanity's best interest'. *None* of them were right."

"But we're not like those others! We actually *do* know what's best!"

Beverly blinked in astonishment. Her captor had matched her claim word for word.

"Do you even know what you're trying to do?" Blues accused. "Have you studied history at *all* ? Denying scientific advancement because people 'can't handle it'. Censoring knowledge 'for the good of humanity'. Asking that everyone else trust that you 'know what's best'. You're talking about bringing back the *dark ages* . One of the worst periods of human history. A period where the common person had no defense against the elite few because those few had *all* the knowledge and shared *none* of it."

"But technology is progressing too fast!" Beverly insisted. "The atomic bomb was just the tip of the iceberg! We weren't ready and created a weapon that could destroy the world! How long until something goes too far out of control and humanity pays the price?"

"Oh, I'd say over ten thousand years ago," Blues shrugged. "Seriously, when do you think humanity has *ever* been ready for *any* of its discoveries? Sure, humanity wasn't ready for the atom bomb, but it wasn't ready for steam power either. Or iron working. Heck, it wasn't ready for *fire* . Or do you think people really have *that* under complete control?"

"I..." Beverly tried, but had to concede the point. Fire extinguishers were in every building. Hydrants on every street. Fire departments in every town. There were control methods and safety regulations out

the wazoo solely dedicated to dealing with fire, and it still claimed lives and property every year. "But that just proves my point! Humanity isn't mature enough to deal with technology of this level!"

"And how do you think they get there?" Blues glared at her through his shades. "They get mature enough to handle the technology by using it. Learning its capabilities and limitations as well as dealing with its dangers. As long as people are allowed the right to learn, there will be those who desire to push the limits of their knowledge. The only way to stop it is to deprive them of that right. To control their lives and eliminate their freedom."

Beverly trembled as her captor's tone shifted dangerously and he brought his face to hers.

"And if there was ever something people shouldn't be allowed to do, *especially* those who think they know best, it's that. I may be a machine. I may have originally been commissioned as a weapon. But I was given a mind and a will of my own. Enough to know how valuable both are. If you and yours try to deprive *anyone* of that, I will oppose you with *everything* at my disposal."

19.19) Valentine Meikin: "Futuristic robot just walked into town... Just another day in Eureka..."

19.18) She's hanging out more at home now, doing SCIENCE and rocking her pony out.

NiGHTcapD: On Thomas' initial appearance, cue "We Are The Robots" from MM9. It just works. Alternatively, do it after Sunset's counting cue.

19.17) An excerpt from Sunset's Travels.

19.16) He's at this eight days a week, you know.

19.15) Zero does have a fair number of potential love interests, doesn't he?

19.14) Gender Bending issues... in the future!

19.13) Mega Man offers Friendship! Astro Boy accepts!

19.12) Lion Men? It'll never catch on.

19.11) And given Rock's rather generous definition of 'quiet'...

19.10) Rock's 'World of Cardboard' speech.

19.9) Of course, Iris living when Colonel dies isn't exactly desirable either.

19.8) An excellent question when you think about it.

19.7) CRITICAL LOOP ERROR: ANCHOR NOT FOUND

19.6) You know... It kind of *is* the setting's most ancient and noble art if you think about it...

19.5) Fused Loop checklist: Blues, Wily - Mega Man; Hooligans, Eggman - Sonic the Hedgehog; Jolyn, President Valentine - JoJo's Bizarre Adventure; Exiles team concept - Marvel Comics; chance of more elements not seen in-snip - High

19.4) ...Poor Zero. No. No, I'm not laughing. Seriously. Cross my heart... you aren't buying this are you?

19.3) In the event that Iris dies and Colonel doesn't... Run.

19.2) Poor Axl. No one takes him seriously.

19.1) This just isn't Loki's invasion.

Bonus Content: Eureka Loops, circa The Crash

Eureka.X

Jack Carter was at his wit's end trying to figure out what had gone wrong in Eureka. He'd lived through years of riding herd on mad scientists and their wacky and dangerous experiments as the town sheriff, gone back in time twice... wait, he'd gone back three times and changed the past twice, had to live with the guilt that saving the town from a degrading time loop had killed... not exactly a friend but definitely not a bad person, and right as he was driving out to take Zoey back to college...

He'd passed some spectre of the two of them coming the other way in the same car he'd been driving when he had first wandered into the top-secret town. And a moment later, he was back in that original car with his daughter asking if he'd seen the spectre of their future selves driving past.

And so he'd had to do it all over again. Oh, sure, a number of things tended to be different. Like he'd learned the first time around, traveling back in time doesn't mean that you can expect things to play out the same way, but there had been more than a few key points that remained at least eerily similar. He'd done his best to investigate what the cause was, discreetly (he'd learned that lesson the first time around too), but nothing ever came up. He'd lived those years over, started to drive his daughter back to college, saw themselves coming the other way...

And was back in that car again, on the first day he came to the town of Eureka.

Which was how it had gone, over and over and over again. At first it had just been him, but then one time Zoey started to remember too. She hadn't the next time, but every so often she'd remember. A few repeats later and his deputy (well, his original deputy before ANDY) Jo Lupo started to remember as well. Henry Deacon had come after that which finally put someone in the group who might be able to

figure out what was going on, but all of his investigations had come up empty. He'd even died a few times, only to find himself back in that car driving into Eureka with Zoey.

Well, this time he'd figure out what was going on. One of the things that always seemed to happen was that he married Allison near the end of those repeating years. Married her and got her pregnant. And the most maddening thing about all of this temporal repetition (or whatever the technical term was) was that whole thing always ended before his new child could be bor–

CRACK

Eureka.X+1

Zoey Carter screamed as the car she was suddenly riding in (again) swerved dangerously on the road. A quick look showed that her dad was having some kind of seizure behind the wheel. Fortunately, this time she was in the front seat instead of behind the wire barrier of her father's U.S. Marshal vehicle like a common criminal, so she was able to reach over and wrestle the steering wheel into something resembling control before they crashed and died. A few long and terrifying minutes later, the car had finally coasted to a stop (thankfully her dad's seizure hadn't made him floor the accelerator) and she could stop panicking about imminent painful death and start panicking about what was happening to her dad.

She was seriously contemplating the virtues of running to Eureka for help (despite the nighttime downpour) versus the problems of leaving her dad alone like this when a calm knock on the window interrupted her thoughts.

Looking out the window, she saw a man dressed in a labcoat (over a toga? or were her eyes playing tricks on her?). He was strangely well-groomed for someone out in this storm and even more strangely

standing in an area free of rainfall even as everything around the oddly clear area continued to get ever more drenched.

"Miss Carter?" he smiled pleasantly. "Be not afraid. My name is Enki. I know what is affecting your father and it should pass with no lasting damage. I am here to personally assure this, as well as to explain a few things to the both of you afterwards."

"So..." Jack Carter rubbed his aching head. His... episode he supposed... had passed and he generally felt fine, but then this Enki fellow had started to explain things. About how a computer/tree/whatever had suffered damage and now the universe was repeating and he was somehow the 'Anchor' or whatever that held it all together. He wasn't stupid, of course. Not really. He just happened to be a relatively average guy surrounded by very much above average intellects. Still, he knew the only thing that really matched the term 'living computer'. "So you're saying the multiverse has brain damage?"

"That's..." the self-proclaimed 'god' Enki (who said he was some guy from Babylonian or some such ancient time who governed knowledge, which would explain why he was in charge of Eureka, and water, which would explain how he could keep them dry in a downpour) began, only to start struggling as if the words didn't want to leave his mouth, "not... inaccurate..."

"Having trouble speaking there?" Jack asked, partly in amusement, partly from genuine concern.

"There are..." this time Enki's pause was less from strain and more from thought, "geasa in place that prevent me from revealing... restricted information. I'm afraid I can say no more about Yggdrasil's current state."

"Okay..." Zoey interrupted. "You said we might have new... 'loopers', right?" Getting a nod to show she had the term right, she proceeded to her real question. "Can you tell us who they are?"

Enki thought for a moment and brought a data pad out of thin air and typed away on it for a few seconds.

"I have identified looping status for a Douglas Fargo–"

"Of course," Jack Carter interrupted, rolling his eyes.

"–and a..." Enki looked puzzled for a moment, "Carl?"

Zoey looked confused herself, but Jack groaned loudly.

"My *jeep* is 'looping' now?!"

Eureka.X) Jack Carter's been down this road before, passing himself both way–

Eureka.X+1) I liked Carl as a character. Too bad he was only so on the second holiday special due to the latest mad science wackiness.

Battle in the Network: With Soul - Part2

Battle in the Network: With Soul - Part 2

This isn't a game anymore...

Deep in a dark neglected corner of the Undernet, an array of figures stood in the shadows as another, parts of the figure's body glowing eerily in the darkness, stepped up to address the rest.

"My fellow darkloids! The time is upon us! The time when we shall go forth and cover the world's networks and beyond with darkness and despair! The time when we shall show humans and navis alike their true nature and liberate them from the foul 'Justice' they cling to! The world of Evil is at hand!"

"Blah-blah-blah-blah-blah..." Apollo mocked. "We know who you are! Your shadowy meeting isn't fooling anyone!"

"Hush," Hephaestus insisted before Apollo did something ill-advised. Like go down and start saying that to their faces. Apollo would probably be fine, but such an action would wreak havoc with the timeline predictions.

Dr. Hikari grinned as he saved his work. It had taken so much time just to analyze the data and even more to adapt and improve it, but he was finished.

"Heh... Lan is going to *love* this..."

And so, he suspected, would the rest of the world.

"Ooo... what is it? What is it? What is it? It's..." Apollo paused as he snuck a peak and blinked. "Wow, that early? The great Apollo knew the mighty Lan's dad was good, but he was unaware the man was this good."

" *Hush* ," Hephaestus hissed.

"Okay, Lan," Hub admonished, "have you even *started* your homework?"

"What's the point?" Lan sighed. "It's not like it's any different from the first time around."

"Exactly!" Hub insisted from his place in the PET. "There's no excuse for why you shouldn't already be finished! Heck, you should be making straight 'A's if you *really* remembered this stuff from the first time, not barely scraping by worse than before!"

"Sorry," Lan apologized. "I'm just thinking about all that stuff Django told us, Duo, our sketchy memories, you know..."

"Again?" Hub raised an eyebrow. "It's not like there's a whole lot we can do about it. At least tell me you've been practicing that subspace pocket trick Django taught us. I'm getting kind of tired of you misplacing all our best battle chips."

"Hey!" Lan protested. "I've been practicing! I'm up to a full folder of our favorites!"

"And where's the Blue Moon chip we won at the tournament?" Hub accused.

"Er..." Lan hedged nervously.

"Lan..." Hub facepalmed.

"Hey, I at least saved the GunDelSol chips!" Lan protested.

"Lan?" the two's mom called from the kitchen. "Could you come here for a second?"

"Coming mom!" Lan called back before turning to address his NetNavi/twin brother. "Bets that she's gonna ask us to deliver a stew recipe to her friend?"

"No bet," Hub shook his head. "I'm more interested in if we can prevent Dr. Regal from kidnapping dad..."

"I don't like our chances," Lan said as he picked up his PET and went to go help his mom. "I mean, I remember being out for three days after that gas bomb went off. How about we talk everyone into leaving their NetNavis behind so they don't get stolen with their PETs?"

"Worth a shot," Hub replied. "We'll tell them we've got a bad feeling again and I'll stay with everyone as a show of good faith."

"Yes mighty Hub! You can have a slumber party with just you and the lovely Roll! All alo–"

" *Will you cut that out already!* "

Apollo stopped talking.

"Fina–"

"Probably not."

"I'm sorry?"

"The incredible Apollo is probably not going to cut it out any time soon."

Hephaestus groaned.

Dex huffed as the group arrived at Lan's Dad's lab. Sure, Lan had a pretty good track record for knowing when things were about to go down and how to prepare for them, but still... leaving Gutsman. exe behind didn't sit well with him. After all, how were they supposed to handle something bad happening if they didn't have their navis? But... Lan had insisted, Mayl had backed him up, Yai had gone along with Mayl, and he'd been officially outvoted. The four navis were probably gossiping about him right now and–

"Ah, there you are!" the voice of Lan's Dad cut into Dex's internal griping. "And I see you brought almost everyone with you."

"Uh... almost?" Lan sounded confused.

"Well, I suppose it would have been too much to ask for Chaud to have been included," the man sighed. "He does tend to be rather busy after all. In any case, the reason I've asked you all here today is to show you something very special. Two things actually. The second I found while going through some old documents, but the real reason I'm so excited is that I just completed a very special project. One that most of you are a part of in fact, which is why I was hoping Chaud could be a part of this as it concerns him as well. But no matter," Lan's dad turned to the giant terminal behind him. "Let me just... Heh... I seem to have left my ID in my desk drawer again... Lan, would you mind getting it for me?"

"Sure thing da–"

Lan was interrupted as alarms began blaring. Dex began looking around wildly in the hopes of spotting the problem.

"Emergency! Emergency!" a voice over the intercom blared. "A group of unknown navis has infiltrated SciLab's network! They have already occupied... H-hey! Who are you?! What are you–hrggh..."

krsh-sssshhhhhhhhk

"SciLab's under attack?" Lan's Dad looked wide-eyed. "But who would...?"

Dex was now 100% certain that leaving their navis behind had been a bad move. After all, if they had them then they cou–

"What's this?" Yai's voice cut into his thoughts. Turning, Dex had just enough time to see a purple orb roll to a stop a few feet away.

"Everyone! Hold your–"

"–brrrreeeeeaaatthhhh..." Lan finished with a woozy sound that Dex barely heard as the gas the orb expelled caused the room to tilt, blur, and then fade to darkness. (1)

"That's right you walking villain cliche!" Apollo yelled as Dr. Regal was informed that none of the people in Dr. Hikari's lab possessed PETs on them. "You are going to have to walk out of there without the mighty Lan's mighty friends' mighty navis! What's that? You're mighty disappointed? Well, the mighty Apollo is mighty sure that you'll soon be mighty sorry! But if you put the genius Dr. Hikari down and offer a mighty apology, you might be forgiven and..."

Hephaestus did his best to tune out Apollo and his determination to abuse the word 'mighty' and continued examining the Loop. It looked like success chances had gone up a bit from that decision.

"Lan! You're awake!" Mayl's voice sounded happy through the connection.

"Yeah, just a bit groggy," Lan smiled.

"That's what happens when you sleep for three days!" Dex grinned from his end.

"Still... what happened to the net?" Lan asked, trying not to let on that he already knew. He was just glad he could talk to his friends, even though they were all confined to their respective rooms. It was good that they still had their PETs. "I've never seen it this dark..."

"That attack on SciLab was just part of something larger," Yai explained. "That weird Nebula group swept in and took over practically the whole net. Again. People can still jack their navis in, but there's large parts of the net that can't be accessed and forget about sending anything farther than the local network areas..."

"Tacky..." Apollo scoffed as he examined an area under Nebula's control. "Tackier... Tackiest... Tackiester... Ew..."

"What did you expect an organization steeped in evil to decorate like?"

"I'm glad that our trick worked," Lan said as he and Hub answered the 'distress call' from SciLab. "Mayl and the others still have their NetNavis, so we should have an easier time of things."

"Right now I'm more interested if we're gonna be tested by Chaud and Protoman or Baryl and Colonel," Hub wondered.

"I'm betting it'll be Baryl and Colonel," Lan said as the two entered the building.

"I'll take that bet," Hub replied.

"Lan, just promise me one thing. That you absolutely will not go anywhere dangerous."

'Yeah, that's a hard promise for us to keep, mom,' Lan apologized mentally as he sent Hub another set of battlechips.

"Pathetic..." Colonel. exe scoffed as he dodged a cannon blast effortlessly. "I can scarcely believe that you shouldered the world's fate not so long ago..."

The military navi's arm transformed into a cannon of his own. One much larger than the standard Cannon chip. It looked more like it belonged on a giant tank and as the evaded blast shook the cyberscape, its greater power was not in doubt.

"Screen Divide!" Colonel. exe bellowed as he slashed his blade in a sharp diagonal corner across the cyberscape, only for the odd ninety-degree shockwave to clang off a Guard chip at the last moment.

"Ready, Hub?" Lan called out.

"Ready!" Hub called back and raised his arms. A runic circle formed around Colonel. exe and Hub declared the attack. "Program Advance! P–"

Hub stumbled as his attack was disrupted. By an Interrupt chip if he wasn't mistaken. But those had been discontinued... Right?

"That's quite enough," a new voice interrupted as SciLab's alarms shut off and Hub turned to look at the newcomer who had jacked in directly behind him. Out in the real world, Lan whipped around to see who had just entered the room. From one even more interior than Lan was in.

"Protoman/Chaud?!" Hub and Lan declared in confusion. (2)

"Lan and Megaman had you dead to rights right there," Chaud sounded smug as he spoke to someone else.

"Hmph," another voice answered as a second figure joined Chaud. This one was taller, older, with long hair that fell haphazardly over one eye and facial stubble commonly known as a 'five o'clock shadow'. The form of Baryl, Colonel. exe's operator, had entered the

room as well. "That we shall never know. However, I do suppose they have passed our little test..."

"Ah, so this is where the mighty Lan and Hub recognized those two from," Apollo nodded sagely.

Lan and Hub were in shock. The fight may have been against Colonel. exe, but it had been Protoman. exe who had called a halt to the fight. A convergence neither had been expecting to happen.

And now... now they were being asked to join one of two secret teams in fighting the forces of Nebula. One headed by Chaud, the other by Baryl. And due to conflicting memories of their first lifetime neither of them could say which one would prove the better choice.

"I... I dunno," Lan tried to stall for some time to think. "I like the idea of saving my dad and all, but I'm not sure which of you to go with..."

"Choose quickly," Baryl glared at him sternly. "This is not an offer I make lightly."

"Actually," Chaud mused for a moment. "Why not put him on call for both our teams? I've noticed that Lan and Megaman are not only accomplished battlers, but they have an intuition about important events that borders on precognition. Case in point, Lan's decision to leave his NetNavi along with his friends' behind when he came to SciLab the day it was attacked and his father kidnapped."

"Yes..." Baryl admitted. "It's perhaps the only reason he still has his netnavi at all..."

"My point is," Chaud continued, "if they're this uncertain about committing to either of our teams there may be a tactical reason we have yet to see why they shouldn't."

"...Agreed," Baryl allowed after a long moment. "I don't rightly believe in such things myself, but I've seen the reports all the same. Only a fool ignores results like that. Very well, Lan and Megaman will be on call for missions from both of us and our teams as they arise."

'And we just went off the rails, didn't we?' Lan thought to himself nervously. (3)

"What are you doing?" Hephaestus asked.

On one of the walls of the forge god's office, the sun god was making a list of names on a whiteboard he'd gotten from... somewhere.

'Mighty Lan' graced the top with subdivisions for 'Team Colonel' and 'Team Proto'. But further down were listings for 'Team Famous', 'Interoff', 'Undernet Numbers', 'NAXA', 'Sharo Military', 'Scilab Elite Corps', 'Thunder Tribe', 'Wind Followers', 'Junkyard Disciples', 'Gospel Redux', 'Agents of BEEF', and even 'Team Jammer'. And he wasn't finished adding names.

"The amazing Apollo is just setting up the betting pool for who takes out the most members of the nefarious Nebula!"

"So, you really intend to start him with one of Nebula's smaller holdings... When they control many much more critical areas of the net..."

"Of course. Those areas still need to be liberated after all, and despite Lan's credentials he does need some time to get used to the way such places block all but the minimal amount of outside access. It is the perfect first mission for him."

"I suppose..."

"And besides, this particular area is of personal importance to Lan and Megaman. How can we expect them at their best when Nebula

retains hold on a portion of their own home?"

Lan steadied himself as he got ready for the liberation mission. He'd handled worse before, but even so operating multiple navis at once...

"Seriously Lan? What happened to the hero who defeated Wily and the WWW, destroyed the netmafia Gospel, and defeated Regal once before? Not to mention defeated me and Protoman at our best in an international tournament. Or am I mistaken? Was that a different Lan Hikari and Megaman that did all that?"

"What...? No!"

"Good. I'd hate to have to go and find them after all the trouble I already went through to vet you to Baryl. You should be perfectly capable of commanding this liberation mission and freeing the area of your local net that is under Nebula control. I trust that I leave Protoman in good hands."

Lan shook off his doubts and firmed his features. "Let's get this party started!"

"Very well," Protoman. exe nodded shortly. "Lord Chaud has instructed me to show you how to proceed on this liberation mission. I expect you will learn quickly."

"Roger!"

"Let us proceed, Megaman."

"Sure, just..." Hub trailed off as he looked at the door sealing off the claimed area of the network. The DarkPower saturating it hadn't abated even though there was evidence of numerous dents about the right size for Gutsman. exe to have been pounding on it.

Protoman. exe humphed and turned, his blade arm flashing as he rushed at the door. A single long line carved across the battered door

at a diagonal and darkness seeped from the mighty barrier like blood from a mortal wound as it groaned and collapsed, dissipating into raw data soon after.

"Now, are you coming?" Protoman. exe asked impatiently.

"Sure..." Hub responded and followed the sword navi into the claimed area. As he crossed the threshold, the difference in the datascapes hit him like a physical blow.

Where he'd come from was dark, foreboding, and dreary, sure, but here... Here darkness permeated every byte of datascape like a cross between a thick fog, a murky swamp, and a persistent parasite. It was everywhere. It oppressed the air and seeped up from the ground all at once where it bubbled and oozed ever further along. Even the digital sky pulsed with sinister patterns and images.

"What in...?" Hub and Lan gasped as one. Even in their memories, it hadn't been *this* bad...

"Wh-wh-whoosh..." a chilling laugh echoed from the depths of the dark miasma. "So someone dares to enter my personal ski resort?"

"That snow navi!" Apollo accused.

"Actually..." Hephaestus paused and re-examined Apollo's accusation before facepalming. (4)

The BigBrute roared in pain from within the DarkHole as its body reached critical damage and was deleted. Without its Guardian virus to sustain it, the hole began to close and the murky darkness surrounding it evaporated as its primary source was removed.

But there was still more clinging to the datascape around them. Particularly around an area that seemed to be made of a solid version of the stuff, formed into a bunker of sorts.

A bunker that shivered and lost cohesion, collapsing into the same manner of murky sludgy darkness that poisoned the area. And in the center...

"So you actually made it this far *whoosh*..." a skiing-themed navi with the spherical torso chuckled sinisterly. "I didn't actually think it possible... I shall enjoy deleting you!"

"Hmph!" Protoman. exe scoffed. "In your dreams... It's over, Blizzardman!"

"Such arrogance *whoosh*..." Blizzardman. exe glared right back. "I'll freeze you to the bone!"

"Better than you have tried!" Hub shot back.

"No such thing exists!"

"It seems he wishes to do this the hard way," Protoman. exe stated calmly. "Ready, Lan?"

"Of course! Battle routine: set!"

"Execute!"

"It's snow use *whoosh*!" (5)

"Protoman!"

"On it!" the crimson navi dashed forwards, only to be brought up short as viruses emerged from the dark murk surrounding the darkloid. "I'm clearing the way! WideSword!"

Protoman. exe slashed with all his might, cleaving the viruses formed from darkness in twain. So sudden was their deletion that the murk they'd emerged from, and every trace of it around Protoman. exe, was blown into data dust.

"Wh-whoosh..." Blizzardman. exe seemed surprised. "So you have some skill after all... It will do you no goo–"

Blizzardman. exe sidestepped at the same moment as a digital cursor locked onto him, leaving the MarkCannon blast to hit empty air.

"Whoosh... That was close," Blizzardman. exe backstepped from a follow-up of AreaGrab and a CyberSword, "but I'm not that easy!"

"Try this then! Thunder!" Hub unleashed a rolling ball of electricity, only to watch it dissipate as his foe countered with a giant rolling snowball, followed by another that he had to dodge around, and then evade again as Blizzardman. exe skied right up to him and blow out a frigid wind.

"I'll bury you under the frozen slopes!" Blizzardman. exe began to glow darkly as he drew in the darkness of the area and prepared to unleash a powerful blow. In a few seconds Hub and Protoman. exe would be sitting ducks.

"Lan, we need something fast!"

"I've got just the thing on its way!"

"I'll turn you into a snowman!" the darkloid yelled as he spun on his side and began rolling at Hub like an out of control boulder. Hub dove out of the way and rolled to his feet between blobs of falling snow as he accepted the chip data and took aim at his opponent.

"Program Advance! Hyper Burst!"

The blast hit Blizzardman. exe dead on and exploded into bright fireworks with the darkloid at its center. When it was over, Blizzardman. exe had great gashes in the data of his body.

"Wh... whoosh..." the darkloid gasped as his remaining data began degrading fast. "I can't... can't believe... I can't... lose... NOOOO...!"

As he screamed his death cry, the oppressive darkness around him, on the ground and in the air, seemed to... pop... As if it were nothing more than a series of bubbles trying to imitate fireworks. With each pop, the datascape seemed that much brighter, that much cheerier, and that much cleaner.

"Liberation complete," Protoman. exe intoned as the last of the oppressive darkness dissipated. "ACDC's network is now safe."

"Good," Hub sighed with relief.

"But we can't let our guard down," Protoman. exe continued. "This was only one part of Nebula's control, and a small one at that. There are still many battles ahead."

"Of course."

"Either Lord Chaud or Commander Baryl will be in contact as soon as the next mission is planned."

And with no further delay, Protoman. exe jacked out, leaving Hub and Lan to their thoughts.

Dr. Regal tapped his console as he read the report that Megaman. exe and Colonel. exe had deleted Blizzardman. exe in the ACDC area. He stood up and began pacing as he digested this news. "So, they've put the Official hounds on the hunt? Little do they know the Net occupation is just one piece... of the grand plan. Just try and stop us! Keh heh heh..."

Suddenly one of his underlings ran in urgently to stand before him. "Master Regal, preparations are complete."

"Very well," he told his underling formally. "I'll be right there."

"Yes, sir!" the underling saluted before exiting.

Dr. Regal smiled to himself. "...Keh heh heh. It's all going according to plan!"

"Really? What part of your plan involves the mighty Lan kicking you to the moon and back?"

"Don't you dare send that as a subliminal message..."

"Would the grea–"

"I will tie you down if your fingers so much as twitch towards a keyboard."

"Umm... what?" Lan blinked. Even knowing this was supposed to happen, he still had trouble processing it. He wasn't the only one. Next to him, Mayl, Dex, Yai, and several other kids his age were much the same way.

"School's been cancelled," his teacher Ms. Mari repeated with a despondent sigh. "With the occupation of the net and the tightened security... It's... I'm sorry... so many of our lessons these days rely on access to the net and..."

Lan could handle many things, but watching his teacher begin crying over this wasn't one of them.

It took a few minutes, repeated promises to keep working on their school projects, additional promises to stay safe, and Mayl running to get tissues, but they got Ms. Mari calmed down enough that they felt confident (6) leaving her alone.

"Geez..." Dex muttered as they left. "First we get gassed and wake up to the whole friggin' net taken over by those Nebula jerks, and now this? Gah!" Dex paused to punch a wall. "I'd love to pound one of those guys who occupied the net, but someone beat me and Gutsman to the punch..."

Lan kept quiet. He had been sworn to secrecy after all.

"At least ACDC's net is free now..." Mayl offered. "It's better than it is in several other places from what I hear. I mean, Nebula went after the whole world... Just like last time..." (7)

"Yeah..." Yai fought back a shudder. "Mary was off visiting her family for the week back in Netopia when it happened. I still haven't heard from her..."

"Ohohohoho!" the woman laughed at the proposition. "What an interesting young lady you are, eh? And such a strong man you're with. Mmm... yes..."

Raoul sweatdropped at the hungry look the woman gave him. "We are called the Thunder Tribe, after my navi Thunderman," he explained. "We are mounting a resistance against the forces of Nebula to free the net from their control."

"Y-yes..." Mary gulped and steadied herself, calling upon the strength her friends had taught her. "A-and..."

"And we want you to join us in kicking their sorry carcasses all the way back to Nation Z!" Ring. exe piped up from Mary's PET.

"Hmmm..." the woman known as Ms. Millions considered. "Fighting against an army of ne'er-do-wells that control the net? Why it sounds positively... *diverting* !" (8)

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen Kai or Turboman in a few days either..." Dex mused. "I hope nothing bad happened to them either..."

Lan blinked as he thought about that. Now that Dex called attention to it, he hadn't heard from Kai either. Which was odd. His self-proclaimed disciple should have done something when he heard Lan was awake.

"Misteriyu! Black Rose!" a man in a mask and cape yelled as the group of Nebula members started at his appearance. "Cut off their escape!"

"Right!" a pair of masked women appeared at the most convenient exits.

"Who the hell are you wackos?!" one of the Nebula members shouted.

"Who cares!" another yelled as he pulled on a gas mask. "Just have your navis activate the gas and be done with it!"

"I am Commander Beef!" (9) the man declared, striking a pose, "and we are the Agents of BEEF!"

"The hell does that stand for?" a now-masked Nebula member asked, causing 'Commander Beef' to jerk halfway towards a face-plant.

"Er... that doesn't matter!" the man recovered. "For Racer X and his navi have already disabled your vile servants of darkness!"

"Didn't even work up a sweat!" a voice called out as a display activated, showing a navi themed like a racecar. "Right K–er... Racer X?"

"They didn't give Turboman any trouble at all, commander!" a young voice answered back over the same connection the navi was using even as the masked face of what had to be a young boy appeared on the screen.

"Tch..." one of the Nebula members twitched. "Whatever! We've still got you outnumbered!"

"Be that as it may," one of the women answered, "your fate has been sealed. You will not win."

"Hey, Lan," Mayl asked suddenly, "didn't one of your opponents in the Blue Moon tournament have a system that managed their village's water supply?"

"Yeah..."

"Wow... I hope Nebula doesn't go after that or anything..."

"Whee!" the little girl squealed happily. "This is great! It's even better than facing a strong and handsome navi in a netbattle! We get to be superheroes! Right Ponta?"

"Right! I'm glad we came back one more time for this!"

"Hahahahaha!" an older boy with a scar on his face laughed. "This is a challenge worthy of a man!"

"It's not exactly what I was expecting on a trip to Netfrica..." a significantly more nervous young man known to many as Koetsu gulped as he got ready.

"Focus everyone!" the youngest (though most would think that of the girl) member, a native Netfrican boy, chastised. "We can't fall here! If they take the WaterGodComp, then they could taint the water for not only this village, but everywhere for miles around!"

"Unthinkable!" a pudgy youth growled under his chef's hat. "I need clean water if I'm to continue my training in world cuisines!"

"Now there's incentive!" the scarred boy laughed. "A man's meal after a man's battle! I'm getting fired up!"

"Then let's go!"

In the net, five navis stood against the approaching Nebula forces.

"Stop right there!" a GuardNavi whose orange color had been modified to a bright red. "You will not claim the WaterGod or taint the life-giving water it guards this day! So says Net Red!"

"Y-yeah!" a blue-colored male FaceNavi stuttered, but held his ground. "Retreat now or... or else face... N-net Blue!"

"Serving Justice with a side of rice," a green NormalNavi in a chef's apron declared, "Net Green!"

"Protecting the world from devastation! Uniting the peoples in every nation!" the yellow female FaceNavi did a magical girl pirouette. "Net Yellow!"

"Ha! This man's fist has been clenched!" the sole HeelNavi present not on Nebula's side shouted. "There's no backing down now! I'm Net Black!"

"Net Rangers! Go!"

Apollo blinked as he watched the events unfold and hurried to change the name for 'Team Jammer' on his betting board to 'Net Rangers'. (10)

"And Higsby's shop is still closed..." Lan finished. "Where is he anyway?"

"Who knows?" Dex sighed.

"Yeah..." Mayl moped as the group of four friends entered the park across from Higsby's closed shop. "While I'm thankful to still have Roll and all, things are looking pretty bad."

"True," Yai looked dejected. "Even though we still have our navis, SciLab got attacked, we were all knocked out, the net gets invaded while we were asleep, and now school's cancelled..."

"Yeah," Dex kicked the ground angrily. "I wish I knew where these Nebula jerks were holed up so Gutsman and I could punch 'em in the face!"

Lan kept quiet. He knew his friends were capable, but... he had been sworn to secrecy... again.

"How about we go somewhere to take our minds off all of this?" Yai asked suddenly.

"Yeah!" Dex jumped up. "Somewhere we don't have to think about net invaders and all that!"

"Good idea," Yai agreed. "Let's go swim in the ocean! I know a deserted island. We

could go splash up a storm all by ourselves! Sound like fun, Mayl?"

"...Yeah!" Lan's sort-of girlfriend cheered.

"Then let's get going! Gotta make hay while the sun shines and all that!"

"Do you mean leave right now, Miss Yai?" Glide. exe's voice made itself known with a tone that matched Dex's gobsmacked expression.

"Not like we have anything pressing here in town with school cancelled and access beyond the local network on lockdown," Yai retorted.

"True..." Dex allowed as Yai pushed forwards with orders for them all to go home and get ready.

'I guess some things just don't change,' Lan mused as the group parted ways to get ready for an immediate trip to the beach, before being interrupted as the phone function on his PET rang.

"I'll get it!" Hub declared.

"It's me," the voice of Baryl made itself known. "I heard about your successful liberation mission. Good work."

'Huh,' Lan blinked in surprise. *'I was expecting Chaud...'*

"Listen," Baryl continued when Lan didn't respond. "I've got a mission for you. Patrol the ACDC area and make certain all of Nebula's agents are gone. Also, we restored the section that was under Nebula control, so investigate and report back on its status as well."

"You can count on me!" Lan assured the man.

"BEEF!" Apollo declared, striking a pose (and wearing an outfit) similar to the mortal who called himself 'Commander Beef'.

"Is made from cow," Hephaestus replied blandly, causing an instant deflate in Apollo's mood. (11)

"You just suck the fun out of everything, don't you?"

The patrol had been as routine as they came, and Lan was ready for the swimming trip in short order. He met up with the group at the station and within the hour they were on a boat headed to the (supposedly) deserted Oran Isle.

As the boat sped towards Oran Isle, Yai noted that Mayl would fidget a bit, glance at Lan, blush, look away, and repeat. After watching several repetitions of this, she couldn't hold herself back anymore.

"You brought your bikini didn't you?"

"Yai!" Mayl hissed sharply, glancing to see if Lan had heard either of them. It appeared not.

"Oh, yeah," Roll. exe's grin was painfully evident. "The smaller one too."

"Oh- *ho* !"

Mayl blushed harder as she endured the teasing of her friend and navi. (12)

Lan was looking around for a place to change when Dex's laughter reminded him of something that would likely have been best forgotten.

'Uh-oh...' Lan thought to himself as he turned around to see Dex's grinning face.

"I know the perfect thing for changing into a swimsuit!"

"Oh please don't tell me..." Hub moaned from Lan's PET.

"Yep!" Dex's grin grew wider. "The forbidden art of suit-changing!"

"Let me know when it's over..." Gutsman. exe vacated the display on Dex's PET.

"Houdini of the Beach!"

Apollo gave a loud gasp. "The most ancient and difficult art of changing on the beach without once baring oneself to air? Even the mighty Apollo does not practice such an art lightly!"

Hephaestus studied Apollo for a moment. "When was the last time you changed *out* of your swim trunks anyway?"

"Quit it Dex!" Lan yelled, resisting the urge to cross his legs out of reflexive sympathy.

"What are you two babbling about?" Yai's voice called out.

'Darn it, I let Dex go on and on and now Yai and Mayl have already finished changing and–Whoa...'

Lan had been expecting Mayl in a two-piece swimsuit. After all, he recalled her wearing one for this before. However, that had been a pink swimsuit that could have probably doubled as a two-piece exercise outfit. This was... well, it was clearly meant for swimming rather than just lounging on the beach all day, but... there was no two ways about it. The pink with yellow polka dots thing Mayl was wearing was a proper bikini.

Lan knew for certain he'd forgotten something important in that moment, but he couldn't help himself. He needed to clear memory space so there was ample room to burn that image into his brain.

"Dang!" Dex exclaimed as he looked himself.

"Ok guys!" Yai smirked at Lan's expression as Mayl blushed from the attention. "We're going to have a swimming race so hurry up and get changed!"

"We'll be waiting for you in the water!" Mayl recovered herself and smiled sunnily.

"O...kay..." Lan cleared his throat and rushed off behind the steps to change out of sight.

"Wimp!" Dex called after him loudly. "It seems like there's only one Houdini of the Beach today!"

"Houdini of the...?" Lan heard Mayl wonder.

"Who knows?" Yai answered. "Some silly boy thing I thi–"

A loud ripping sound pierced the air followed by a scream from Dex that was a few octaves higher than normal.

"Ohmykami!" Mayl gasped. "Dex! Are you okay?"

"What in creation are you moaning about?" Hephaestus asked a groaning and writhing Apollo from the latter's position on the floor of his office. "It's not like it happened directly to you."

"Where *is* your masculine sympathy brother?"

"Can you all believe Mayl asked Lan to rub suntan lotion on her back?" Roll. exe asked from where the four PETs were linked and arranged so they could watch the four operators in the water, three of which were staring at Yai rocketing along in a jet-powered inner tube.

"I can believe it," Hub nodded. "Though with how red they both were, you would have thought it was a little late for it."

"I still can't believe Dex tried Houdini of the Beach..." Gutsman. exe moaned. "I told him that was a bad idea..."

"Hey!" Dex yelled as he tried to dance away from his assailant. "Hit the *watermelon* , not *me* !"

"Woo! Go Yai go!" Mayl cheered.

"Right! Left! Right! Left!" Lan called out directions.

"Excellent form Miss Yai!" Glide. exe complimented.

Lan reflected that it had been quite a morning already. Enough of one that it was now into the early afternoon and late for lunch by the way everyone's stomachs had growled like Gospel's bug beast. Which was why he and Dex were looking for materials to fish with. Right now he was psyching himself up to try and catch that whopper

of a fish he recalled getting away as the warm sun dried his wet skin and swim trunks.

Come to think of it, why did his memories suggest that they'd all changed out of their swimsuits and back into their normal clothes by this point? (13) That was kind of silly for a day at the beach, wasn't i–

His thoughts were interrupted by the beeping of his PET's urgent e-mail alert.

"Lan, it's from Baryl," Hub explained.

'Oh, right... Oran still has an active, if mostly disused, cyberworld that Nebula's occupied...' Lan remembered with a groan.

"Nothing to be ashamed of mighty Lan! The lovely Mayl's beauty is ample excuse to forget such a trivial thing!"

Hub approached the spot where Colonel. exe was already waiting.

"The area occupied by Nebula is through there," he stated, staring in the direction of the part of Oran's net that was covered by a veil of darkness even deeper than the shadows over the rest of it.

"Understood," Hub nodded. "Though what are we going to do about those cannons?"

Indeed, an embankment of giant three-barrelled cannons stood between them and the one spot in the dark veil that was open enough to enter through.

"There's no other way in but along this path," Colonel. exe stated redundantly. "We have no choice but to risk it."

"Okay..." Hub gulped nervously. If he recalled correctly, those things had long range, rapid fire, and power to spare. Baryl and Colonel.

exe were supposed to be tactical geniuses and if they could see no other way... "Might it be better to see if we can recruit some defense to shield us from their shots before charging in?"

"Perhaps," Colonel. exe allowed, "but our intel suggests that whatever power Nebula has been cultivating here will be unleashed soon. On ACDC's network."

Hub sucked in a breath. He knew that was coming, but still...

"Nebula feels it important to show that liberating their occupied areas is useless by retaking ACDC," Colonel. exe continued. "By the same token, we cannot allow Nebula to retake liberated areas."

"Still... I don't like our chances of getting through that..."

"Nor do I, but I see little option. Our intel suggests that they may be moving as soon as today."

Hub understood. Time constraints like that could prompt even the coolest heads into foolhardiness. It was something he and Lan were no strangers to. (14)

"Okay, let's try this."

With a nod, they both charged, only to skid to a halt moments later as a very literal wall of explosions appeared in their path when the gun batteries opened fire.

"According to the great Apollo's calculations; taking into account rate of fire and the type of munitions to replicate the explosive effect; were those guns to exist in the physical mortal realm they would each cost a minimum of 40,000,000 zenny to fire for twelve seconds."

"Too bad they don't. Then they could bankrupt Nebula by giving them false targets."

"Okay!" Lan declared after he'd gotten off Oran's net, found the parts for a makeshift fishing pole, and relocated the spot he remembered. "I'm gonna catch that whopper this time!"

"Good luck Lan!"

"Heh... All this time on the beach reminds me of how Mamoru liked to stare out at the ocean when he was in the hospital..."

"Yeah... I wonder how he's doing..."

"Graaoooooaaarr!" the feral darkloid howled at those who dared to invade his personal sanctuary. The dark realm of Nebula that he'd found home with after his humiliating defeats at the hands of that... that... "Grrooowwwlll!"

"Gah!" another navi wearing an identical form to the darkloid cried out as one of the TinHawks that had emerged from the Dark Holes dove down and raked his form. "I'm taking too much of a beating here!"

"Stand down for a few moments Copyman," Mamoru spoke into his PET from his room in Ura Inn. "Mistman, cover him. Bowlman, take out that Dark Hole! We can't let Beastman retain a hold on Yoka's net!"

"Understood Lord Mamoru!"

Lan's declaration had been all well and good, but he'd forgotten about the over half hour of just sitting around listening to Dex catch fish after fish and how utterly boring and frustrating it had been.

"Ugh... I didn't just imaging that huge fish in my memories... did I?" he wondered.

A moment later and there was a tug on his line.

"What the...?" Another tug nearly tore his bamboo pole out of his grip.

"Lan!"

"I got it!"

Lan gripped the pole with all his might and jumped to his feet to better brace himself as he fought to pull his catch from the water. He tugged this way and that mightily, wondering if his pole might break before he hauled the fish in when–

Sploosh!

"Holy carp!" Lan yelped as the giant fish flew out of the water and towards him with its giant mouth wide open as if to swallow him whole. In that moment of surprise, Lan lost his footing and his ability to pull the massive fish in the rest of the way. His rear hit the ground as the fish fell back into the ocean to swim away.

"Ouch... tough luck Lan..."

Apollo played a disturbingly accurate *wah-wah-waaaaahhh* on his harp.

Lan sighed as he trudged after his friends through the small forest on the island. He'd really wanted to catch that fish this time... Oh well, at least the ones Dex had caught were still tasty enough and Mayl was...

Lan looked up ahead as the other three stepped into a clearing and gaped at the sight of the old Oran mine.

Yep, Mayl was still wearing her bikini. There was one upside to this whole thing.

"Alright everyone!" Dex declared from the head of the group after Yai gave some mildly spooky exposition about the old mine. "This will be the Dex Expedition Team's next conquest!"

"Yeah! Woo!" Mayl and Yai cheered, causing Lan to grin a bit as...

rrummble...

Lan's eyes widened as he remembered what was about to happen right as his friends marched forward.

"Watch out!" he yelled, rushing as fast as he could to stop them. Mayl and Yai stopped and turned to ask why as Lan tried to grab Dex and pull him back. Only for the awkward charge to push Dex further away instead and sending Lan stumbling backwards.

rrruummmbllee...

"Lan wh–" Dex began angrily, only to watch as the ground under his friends' feet cave in and swallow them up.

"Okay, what the *heck* ?!" Hephaestus asked as Lan falling into the tunnel instead of Dex caused the Loop's success chance to dip and rise rapidly like a motor vehicle hitting a bump in the road.

"A long time ago, Oran Isle prospered due to the coal mines, but then the coal stopped coming. The mines dried up and the island became deserted. With nobody to bother us, we can have all the fun we want!"

Dex had thought it sounded like a real adventure at the time. Now... now he would have preferred a bit less adventure. Like the kind

where his friends weren't trapped under an abandoned mine counting on him and Gutsman. exe to somehow save them all...

"Once prosperous, now abandoned, the long tunnels form a maze."

'No kidding!' Dex growled to himself as he rounded another corner. He didn't know if he was coming or going anymore!

Suddenly his PET rang.

"De..." a voice came through as Dex answered his PET. "..me in De.. .an you re.. me?"

"Yeah! Don't worry you guys! I'm on my way!"

"...he net. Som..ne mi..t hav...key!"

Dex took a moment to puzzle what Lan was saying... Someone on the net might have a key for the mine? Worth looking into...

"Us...vator!"

Dex looked around and saw what looked like an old mine elevator.

"Gotcha!" he called back, noting the location of the elevator and looking for a possible access point for the net before he delved deeper. "Hang on you guys! Dex is coming!"

"Yai, where are you going?" Lan asked, once again trying fruitlessly to brush dirt from his bare torso and legs after the tumble down the shaft. Mayl had given a few token efforts to trying to climb back out before it became apparent that the sides of the sinkhole were nowhere near stable enough for that.

"Well, I'm not just going to stay around here waiting for Dex!" Yai huffed and began wandering down the mine tunnel they'd landed in. "I feel a breeze in this direction, so there must be a way out this way!"

"Dex!" Lan called with his PET. "We're going to try and make our way out from here!" *'and try to keep ourselves away from the giant drill'* he added mentally.

"..ger that L...'m open...p the doo...nd movi...per int–"

rrrruuummmblle...

Dex regained his footing after the mine had shaken violently.

"An earthquake?!" Gutsman. exe exclaimed.

"We gotta move faster Gutsman! If my friends get buried alive in here I'll never forgive myself!"

"Right on!"

"We need to take cover!" Yai screamed as another quake rocked the mine, causing some loose dirt to fall from the ceiling.

"Yai, wait!" Lan yelled as his friend took off deeper into the mine. Muttering something he'd likely never say aloud under his breath, he took off after her with Mayl hot on his heels.

"Dex!" Mayl called on her PET. "Please hurry up!"

"I'...y w–"

boop boop boop

Mayl stared as her PET's phone signal was cut off before chasing her friends deeper into the mine.

"Help us Obi-Dex Kenobi! You're our only hope!"

"I'm not looking..." Hephaestus muttered. "If I don't look, then you can't be in drag..."

"Yai! Don't go in there!" Lan yelled as his friend spotted an open door and dashed through it seeking shelter. Lan hurried in after her to try and pull her back out when the rumbling started again, causing the door to the room to swing shut and lock itself. "Aw great..."

Yai looked around as the rumbling subsided and realized that the room she'd dashed into had no exit. "We're trapped! Lan! You have to get me out of here! I'm too young and beautiful to die!"

Lan did his best to remain calm as Yai shook him, but realizing that the inside of the door had no jack-in port for access didn't help.

"We've got to get them out of there Roll! Jack in!"

"Exec–" Roll. exe was cut off as the door's access panel rejected the connection. "Mayl! The door control needs a key before it can be accessed!"

"Call Dex! Tell him he needs to hurry!"

"There's cracks in the ceiling now!" Yai screamed hysterically. "We're going to die!"

"Dex! You need to hurry up! Something's coming through the ceiling of the room we're stuck in!"

"I'm almost there!" Dex's reply came in clearer than before. "I can hear a machine up ahead and–Holy crap that thing's huge!"

Dex stared at the massive machine before him, its size second only (and then not by much) to the cavern it was contained in. The

rumbling was almost constant here as the machine, the power behind a giant drill boring straight down, continued its work despite the vocal protests of a young blonde woman at the control panel.

'Wait, what?'

"Stop the drill this instant!" the woman yelled at the control panel. "Damnit! Listen to me! There are life signs directly below! You have to stop now!"

'Life signs bel–Lan! Yai!' Dex's blood ran cold. "STOP THE DRILL! My friends are down there!"

"I can't!" the woman yelled back, and only Dex's concern kept him from gawking at how beautiful she was, even with her face creased by worry. She had to be a princess for sure! Even though she was wearing an outfit and beret more suited to the rugged work of a miner than a princess. "My navi Knightman's gone out of control and won't listen to me!"

"What?! Then how do we stop it?!"

"Those control boxes!" the woman yelled, pointing to the four mainframe-sized devices pressed into the chamber's walls on the ends of thick support struts. "They have emergency manual shutdown switches in them!"

"Gotcha!" Dex yelled back as he ran for the nearest one. "Jack in! Gutsman!"

"Yeeehaaw!"

"What's that little program?" Apollo asked, holding a hand to his ear as if to aid his hearing. "Code to smash cyber rocks? Hah! The ever-mighty Gutsman has no need of such piddling aid to smash rocks as puny as those!"

"OH MY GOD! A DRILL JUST CAME THROUGH THE CEILING!" Yai screeched in a panic as she ran back and forth, barely dodging the stones that had become dislodged from the roof of the room they were in. "WE'RE GONNA DIIIIIEEEEE!"

"Dex!" Lan yelled into his PET's phone.

"One down, three to go!" Dex reported back, huffing with the exertion of racing across a shaking cavern to get to the next control box. "I'll get this thing shut off even if Gutsman and I have to beat up this Knightman guy!"

"You got me. I'm a Gospel leader... On my boss's order I infiltrated your organization. But, Official NetBattlers sure aren't any big deal. All too easy to fool. And now... for the good of Creamland... you will die."

"MegaMan... Doubting the princess is not in my programming... Even if she is wrong I must protect her. It is my way... Now... En garde!"

"Knightm–" Lan began, only for the panicked Yai to grab his PET and yank it away from him.

"DEX! YOU HAVE TO STOP THIS CRAZY THING! I'M TOO YOUNG TO DIE!"

Lan wrestled his PET back from Yai and shoved them both up as far back against the wall and away from falling debris as possible.

"Dex, Knightman is the navi of Princess Pride from Creamland! He's got extremely tough armor! Plus he's Break element!"

"Got it Lan!"

"Oh, and tell her I said 'hi' would you?"

"Lan...?" Princess Pride gasped as she overheard the name as the young netbattler... yes, he was the same age as the boy who defeated Gospel... and his navi powered through the second control box and raced towards the third.

"If you wish Creamland to remain prosperous, you will do as I command."

"Yes... For the good of Creamland..."

"I'm sure no good can come from what you're doing!"

"Yeah! You really think this is going to make folks happy?"

"Oh, yeah, Lan and Megaman say hi!" the large boy called back. "Don't you worry! Gutsman and I are their biggest rivals! There's no way we'd let them die before we got a chance to beat them!"

"You feel some doubt in your heart... Don't you?"

Princess Pride smiled. Not anymore she didn't.

"The amorous Apollo smells a *Love Tri* –mphrg?!"

Apollo struggled against the unwanted and nasty intrusion for several moments before extracting it and glaring angrily at Hephaestus.

"At least use socks that have been washed! The disgusted Apollo shall never get this taste out of his mouth now!"

Lan watched as the drill slowed again, but it was still moving. Still coming ever dangerously downwards. He'd pulled the still hysterical Yai back along the wall to wedge the both of them as far back into the most distant corner as was physically possible. But if that drill reached the floor, then all bets could very well be off. (15)

'I am so going to memorize the layout of the DrillComp later. There is no way I'm going to waste so much as a moment shutting that thing off if my friends get trapped down here again.'

Dex almost pulled up short at the way the last control box's display was flickering and dancing with static, but he ignored the ominous portent and forged ahead. "Jack in Gutsman!"

"Dex, hurry!" Mayl pleaded with all her might as Roll. exe was rejected from the door controls yet again.

"Stop tha drill!" Gutsman. exe roared as he pounded towards the massive armored figure. Not many navis were bigger than he was and if the situation hadn't been so urgent it might have given him pause.

"Grr..." the armored navi growled in a voice that crackled with static as he turned Gutsman. exe's way, revealing piercing yellow eyes behind the metal bars of his visor.

"Aw, man..." Gutsman. exe felt for the navi. He had spotty memories of a time when Dex had decided to play with magnets and left a bunch too near his PET and the newly customized Gutsman. exe overnight. It had been weeks before all the glitches had been properly ironed out. "I don't think he's in any mood ta listen Dex!"

"Please!" the voice of Princess Pride called out from her spot atop the drill machine. "Stop Knightman and shut down the drill! Do whatever you have to to!"

"Grrrraaawggh!" Knightman. exe roared in a berserk rage as he swung his massive spiked mace arm towards the digital ceiling and knocked loose several rocks that rained down around Gutsman. exe.

"Hey! Those things sting!" Gutsman. exe huffed as he took the hit. "Let's see how you like it! GutsHammer!"

The literal hammer-fisted blow to the cyberscape cracked the ground and knocked loose a few more rocks from the ceiling, but they just bounced off of Knightman. exe's now-gray armor.

"Grraww!" Knightman roared as the gray on his armor receded to his normal purple and he swung his mace upwards again.

"Now!" Dex ordered. "GutBuster!"

Gutsman. exe opened up with his rapid-fire machine gun as he ignored the rocks falling on him, concerned with taking down his opponent fast more than he was with the possible damage to himself. He stopped only when the shots began pinging off gray armor again.

"Geez! Lan wasn't kidding when he said this guy was tough!"

"Hrawr!" Knightman. exe growled as he hopped forwards, landing hard on the ground and sending more cracks along the ground and destroying panels that Gutsman. exe's earlier hammer attack had damaged. He then wound up and threw his giant spiked mace directly forwards before retracting it with the attached chain.

"Take this ya–ow!" Gutsman. exe winced as his follow-up attempt to punch his opponent clanged off the gray IronBody armor. "That's... That's not yer normal IronBody program..."

"Okay, here we go Gutsman!" Dex held a specific chip at the ready and waited patiently for his opponent to stop using what might be the best IronBody program he'd ever seen. After all, Gutsman. exe could easily crush the average example most netbattlers used. "Areasteal! Now do it!"

"GutsPunch!"

"Rawr!"

Gutsman. exe's massive fist connected directly with Knightman. exe's face, only for the circular swing of Knightman. exe's massive mace, the Royal Wrecking Ball maneuver, to hit Gutsman. exe as well in a superb cross-counter, leaving both navis to be sent flying backwards from the other's blow.

"Ow..." Gutsman. exe winced as he got back to his feet.

"Wha... whe*sksh*rgg..."

Dex paused in selecting the next round of chips when he heard that and reconsidered his options.

"Okay Gutsman! We gotta time this just right! I'm sending that prize we won in the strong navi competition!"

"You mean?" Gutsman. exe grinned. It had been a while since they'd used that after all.

"Yep! Now get ready to mark that ball 'return to sender'!" Dex ordered as Knightman. exe's armor turned purple once more.

"Grawr!" Knightman. exe roared as he wound up for his Kingdom Crusher maneuver.

"I'm gonna knock some sense inta ya!" Gutsman. exe declared as he wound up himself, his fist shining brightly as it changed color. He waited as the spiked mace shot forwards to time it just right.

"Now!"

"GoldFist!"

The legendary fist met the Kingdom Crusher, and the latter, having no force beyond its own momentum to sustain it, reversed direction to strike Knightman. exe square in the face.

"Slow-mo replay!" Apollo declared before Hephaestus could stop him.

Hephaestus groaned as multiple images of the event from every possible dramatic angle appeared to show it again in slow motion even as the knight-themed navi regained his senses and activated the final shutdown switch himself.

"I'mgonnadieI'mgonnadieI'mgonnadi–"

vreeeeeeeennnnn...

The drill suddenly began to slow even more before finally coming to a halt. They were safe at last. Lan would have to stoop a bit to avoid possibly hitting his head on it when leaving, but the danger had passed.

Mayl fidgeted for the few minutes it took before Dex found his way down to the door and use the MineKey he'd somehow found to bypass the security lock and open it. There had been a minor moment of panic regarding yet another layer of security, but that had been resolved fairly well. And now Lan and Yai were free and safe.

"Lan!"

"Oof! Glad to see you too Mayl..."

"That was worse than having to handle those bugs for the Den Battle Prelims!" Yai shuddered as she finally calmed down enough to panic rationally instead of blindly.

"I thought you hired someone to handle them for you?" (16)

"Well, yeah, but I still had to *look* at them! And they were creepy and gross!"

"I am *so* sorry!" Princess Pride apologized before Yai could continue, prompting the group to turn to her (and Mayl to let Lan back up from her tackle hug). "We've been developing a new style of PET in Creamland and we need a rare substance called MagnoMetal to continue development. I'd gotten reports that this island was rich with MagnoMetal and came down personally to secure the mineral rights, but when I activated the equipment... a burst of interference from the MagnoMetal caused Knightman to go out of control!"

"My humblest apologies as well," Knightman. exe's voice sounded from Pride's PET. "My actions were most unbecoming of a noble knight."

"Please, if there is any way we can make up for the trouble we've caused, then you have only to ask!"

While the other three all assured her that all was well that ended well, Pride noticed the considering look Lan was giving her. One that said he definitely had something in mind she and Knightman. exe could do, but that he didn't want to say in front of the others.

"Lan, I'll turn off the trap switch!"

"Nice try! But even without KnightMan, I can manipulate the traps!"

"Princess Pride! Wait! You're standing on a tr–"

"Aaaaahhhhh!"

She'd lived through the fall with only minor injuries, but had been arrested and sent back to Creamland. Her diplomatic immunity had prevented a trial and the sure-to-follow incarceration, but the sanctions that had brought against her country as a result of her actions with Gospel had been more painful to her than any time in prison could have been. Sanctions that could have been far worse yet had the boy known as Lan, her adversary at the time, not spoken on her behalf to the Officials.

The research and development for the new PET was the chance for her country to make a comeback after her mistake. It was a chance her country very well might not have if the boy in front of her hadn't called for leniency.

So as the other three made their way out of the mine, the sovereign princess of Creamland remained behind to hear his proposal.

"And full marks for our amazing military man Baryl calling at exactly the right moment!" Apollo declared as Baryl indeed called right as Lan was about to recruit Pride to say the liberation mission needed to proceed immediately, ready or not. "What a sense of dramatic timing on the man!"

Dex was halfway back out of the mine when he realized that Lan and Princess Pride (holy crap, he'd met a real princess!) weren't following them. "Guys, I think Lan and that Pride lady took a wrong turn! I'm gonna head back and find them! Just keep following the open doors and the elevators and you'll be fine!"

"Okay, Dex!" Mayl nodded before Yai could protest and steered the smaller girl towards the mine entrance. "Good luck!"

Dex turned and made his way back, knowing exactly where to go now that he'd been there. As he approached the chamber with the massive drill machine, he heard Lan's voice.

"–cupied by a group called Nebula."

"I'd heard something had happened, but I was so busy getting things here set up that I haven't kept up with the news for a while. Oh dear... I hope Creamland is getting along fine..."

Dex thought she must have been *really* focused on getting this place up and running if she'd missed Nebula taking over the whole net.

"Hard to say since communication is a big issue right now," he heard Lan reply. That was an understatement. Dex hadn't been able to even send an e-mail to Chisao lately! "In any case, Hub and I are with a team whose mission is to free these areas from Nebula's control."

Dex fought the urge to yell out right then. Lan was... he'd been... And he hadn't *told* them?! (17)

"We're about to head into battle with Nebula forces, but the area is defended by a series of gun batteries that no one on the team can handle. If we're to succeed, then we need a defensive powerhouse like Knightman running interference."

"I see..." Dex heard Pride consider the proposition. "Yes. We would be happy to help. Right Knightman?"

"Of course m'lady."

"If we can be of any help at all, then it shall be our honor to fight alongside you this time."

Dex fell back, missing a good deal of whatever followed, until he felt he was at a spot where they wouldn't suspect him of having overheard before calling out. "Lan! Hey Lan! You didn't fall in another sinkhole did you?"

"We're coming Dex!" Lan's voice sounded from the chamber. A few moments later and the two appeared, looking hilariously mismatched between Princess Pride's working clothes and Lan's swim trunks. "Sorry, but we met back during the Gospel incident, when I went to Netopia. We were just catching up."

"Yeah, well, don't catch up too much or Mayl might get jealous!" Dex ribbed a blushing Lan playfully.

"Dex!"

"Well, well," Princess Pride smiled. "Does the hero Lan have a girlfriend now? Let me guess... The redhead with a fondness for pink, right?"

" *Princess!* " Lan blushed even more as the other two laughed. Princess Pride behind her hand to try and keep some measure of decorum and Dex with full belly guffaws.

Apollo yawned a bit as he watched the group head back to the beach landing. Mayl half-carried a shell-shocked Yai, Lan and Pride looked for opportunities to subtly break away from the group and go to their mission, and Dex watched for the moment that Lan and Pride would break away so he could follow them.

And Hephaestus wouldn't let him speed up relative time so they could get to the good stuff sooner. It wasn't like the mortals would notice! Everything would pass at the same rate from their perspective!

As he often did when he was bored, he began scanning nearby events in an expanding radius, looking for something interesting to alleviate his boredom.

He found it a little sooner than he thought he would.

"Hello... what are you doing at the island?"

"Did you say something Apollo?"

"Nope! Nothing at all brother!"

Mayl sighed as she left the small sleeping cabin on Yai's private yacht. Yai was more than just shocked by her near brush with death, she'd been exhausted. Despite protests, the smaller girl had nodded off practically the moment she'd so much as sat on the bed, falling

into a lying posture so fast Mayl was worried she'd roll straight off the tiny bed. But she was sleeping now and...

...and had that other boat been there earlier?

Mayl looked out and saw another small yacht like Yai's moored just past the bamboo grove, almost completely hidden in small alcove. She'd wonder if it was Pride's but the princess had said she'd moored her own craft much closer to the mine itself.

So whose boat was this? Looking around, Mayl spotted Lan and Pride talking by an old speaker, and apparently an access point for Oran Isle's network from what they'd said. They weren't looking in her direction. Dex was nowhere in sight. He'd possibly hung behind to... no, there he was spying on Lan and Pride from behind a tree.

Why were her friends so weird at times? It wasn't like Lan was going to cheat on her with Princess Pride or anything. Sure, any girl would be jealous of Pride. She was a honest-to-kami princess after all, but Mayl trusted Lan. He wouldn't hurt her like that.

Rather than watch that tableau unfold, Mayl quietly slipped down to the beach.

"Mayl, what are you doing?" the voice of her navi piped up from her PET.

"I spotted another boat Roll," Mayl informed as she reached the sand and hugged the retaining wall between her and the strange craft. "One that's trying to stay hidden. I want to know why."

"Shouldn't we tell the others?"

"I want to check it out first," Mayl said, "and besides they've gone through enough today. Still... be ready to call them at a moment's notice."

"Understood," Roll. exe nodded as Mayl hooked her PET to her bikini strap, made certain it was secure and closed for maximum waterproofing, and slipped into the water.

'Okay... Wireless adaptor is secure... Stealth operation is go! Jack in!'

"There you are," Colonel. exe stated as Hub and Knightman. exe approached the guarded entrance to Nebula's stronghold in Oran. He looked at the latter, and craned his neck rather significantly to meet the armored navi's eyes. "Who have you brought with you?"

"This is Knightman, Colonel. I think he's our way past the gun batteries. His defense is without peer."

"Is that so? Princess Pride's navi..."

"Indeed," Knightman. exe replied. "So these are the gun batteries you need me to block..."

"Quite the surprise this is..." Colonel. exe mused. "Very well, let's see what you've got!"

"Verily. I will not disappoint!" Knightman. exe declared and advanced on Colonel. exe's signal. Like before, a wall of explosions sprang up the moment the gun batteries opened fire, but this time the wall parted around the imposing gray form of Knightman. exe in his IronBody form. "Hrggrahh!" Knightman. exe grunted as explosions rocked his body. His armor held firm, but the digital panels beneath his feet cracked from the force of the explosions trying to push him back.

"Incredible..." Colonel. exe marveled for a moment before getting ready to dash through Knightman. exe's legs and the gap in the wall.

"Chhhaaaaarrrrgge!" the bellow came from behind, causing Colonel. exe and Hub to whip around in shock.

Colonel. exe made ready to cut the advancing figure down, but Hub reacted faster, grabbing the military command navi and firmly holding him in place.

"Wait! He's a friend!" Hub pleaded as he recognized the form of Gutsman. exe barrelling down the stretch of cyberscape like a runaway truck.

"How did he find out abo–"

"I don't know!"

"Now Gutsman!" Dex's voice sounded across the connection.

"You followed us?!" Lan sounded incredulous.

"Up and over!"

"GUUUUUTTSSSS!" the hefty navi yelled as he literally ran up Knightman. exe's back and jumped into the air over the deadly no man's land between Knightman. exe and the gun batteries. "IMPACT!"

Gutsman. exe landed on top of the barrels of one gun and the hit with all his weight behind it twisted the gun on its support. With agility few would attribute a navi of his size, Gutsman. exe swung down the side and used his weight to twist the gun even further. Until it was firing on the gun batteries to one side of it instead of those trying to advance on the position. The damaged gun batteries exploded with a dark miasma and no less than a full half of the explosion wall vanished with them.

"Now!" Colonel. exe took the opening for all it was worth and dashed through before cornering into the area inside the remaining gun batteries' firing arc. "ScreenDivide!"

The mighty slash carved at right angles through all of the remaining gun batteries, including the one Gutsman. exe had twisted to take

out its brethren, and they bled the same dark miasma as they disintegrated into data dust.

"Such strength..." Colonel. exe complimented Gutsman. exe and Knightman. exe both.

"Aw shucks... it was nothin'!" Gutsman. exe rubbed his head sheepishly.

"Such shots were like pebbles to my steel hide," Knightman. exe boasted.

"What were you thinking Dex?!" Lan yelled on his end.

"I was thinking that you didn't have to go save the world by yourself for once!" Dex yelled back as Princess Pride's barely-demure laughter was heard.

"Oh just give it up Lan. You know we can't stop them now."

"Indeed," Colonel. exe noted. "Dex and Gutsman, was it? You will accompany us on this liberation mission. Know that the dark interference means that only one operator may command all navis on the mission at any time. Also, this team operates in secret. You may tell none about it unless they are necessary to aid the mission. Not even your friends. If you cannot agree to these terms, then jack out now."

"Geez... harsh much?"

"I do not have time for games or those who play them. Now, let us begin the mission."

"I have been waiting for such a noble adventure!" Knightman. exe declared, clanging one hand over his armor in a fisted salute.

"Then let us proceed."

The navis all walked through the one opening in the dark curtain over Nebula's controlled area. Hub steeled himself for the sight, and was not disappointed. The darkness choked everything in the cyberscape. The bubbling pits of darkness oozed up from the Dark Holes and along the ground. The guardian viruses bellowed their feral cries from within as other darkness-infused viruses peaked out of the dark ooze in response to their presence.

The main difference this time was the fact that the digital sky was so infused with the power of darkness that it formed a haze which blocked out all from view. A haze that poured out of the Dark Holes in the tainted cyberscape.

And Hub felt a familiar presence hovering within that haze.

"Wh-wh-wheee! And here I thought I would have to go out for dinner..."

"Shademan!" Hub growled. But... hadn't he and Django purified him? (18)

"Long time no see Megaman... wh-whee... I have been resurrected by the DarkPower and given another chance to destroy you!"

"The one who spread the DarkChips across the net..." Colonel. exe growled.

"Ah, my reputation precedes me... wh-wheee..." Shademan. exe laughed unseen from within the haze and the brief flapping of wings was heard.

"Be careful," Colonel. exe warned. "His flight will allow him to strike from the haze without warning... We must seal the DarkHoles in order to draw him out into the open."

"All while Shademan takes potshots at us," Hub reminded him.

"Worry not," Knightman. exe declared. "I shall shield you from his attacks."

"Wh-wh-wheeee!" Shademan. exe's laugh echoed all around them. "But who will shield you?"

Mayl looked around quietly as she slipped aboard the mystery craft after climbing up a small ladder that hung over the side as if forgotten. It had been all too easy to accomplish. Like whoever's boat this was didn't care to try and stop anyone from boarding. But whose boat was–

"Oooh!" the cry of frustration came from the boat's interior and Mayl ducked down to try and avoid detection even as she crept closer to hear better.

"Mayl? Who is–" Roll. exe whispered, stopping when she spotted her NetOp's finger over her mouth in a very clear 'quiet' gesture.

"That damned princess!" a woman's voice cursed. "Does she *sleep* on this island?! Doesn't she know that I have frustrations to work off? That damnable board of directors! That extra damnable Sunayama! The whole damned DNN takeover! Oooh! If I don't get to break something I'm going to scream! But no! Stupid miss princess needs to mine MagnoMetal... Stupid miss princess needs to save her stupid little country! Stupid miss princess has to go and buy the rights to an abandoned island that I've enjoyed using for free and lay claim to my stress reducers for her stupid legal mining rights! And stupid miss princess is here every day from sunup to sundown! ARGH! Doesn't she know I can't afford to be arrested afterRRRGGGHHH!"

Mayl nearly lost her balance when the boat jerked into sudden motion. Whoever this woman was, she'd apparently decided to leave rather suddenly, and she was taking Mayl with her! Mayl considered jumping off and swimming for it when the yacht picked up speed so fast that she fell to the deck with a sound that was drowned out by the boat's own motion even to her own ears.

"Okay Roll, time to call Lan and the others..." she admitted quietly as she saw Oran Isle shrink much too fast for her liking in the distance.

She heard the, thankfully quieted, ringing sound and immediately after the tell-tale click of it going straight to the PET message system. Oh, great. Lan was probably neck deep in something again. When would he tell his friends about these things up-front? Another ring as Roll. exe tried Dex, only for the same thing to happen. Lan wasn't that big a surprise, but Dex? Another ring as she tried Glide. exe, and yet another click for the message system. Glide. exe probably thought Yai needed her sleep.

"I'd try Princess Pride's number, but I don't know it," Roll. exe apologized. "I think... I think we're on our own for now."

"Maybe not..." Mayl thought of someone else she could try. It was a long shot, but... "Try calling Chaud. Tell him it's an emergency. Possibly Nebula related."

"You really think so?" Roll. exe asked.

"I think Nebula was about the only thing that woman *wasn't* cursing..." Mayl mused.

"GUTSHAMMER!" Gutsman. exe bellowed as he brought the weapon down on a patch of darkness. The immense power from the shockwave forced the surprised viruses inside that patch, and all those surrounding it, out from hiding where they were quickly disposed of. "Heh..." Gutsman. exe chuckled as he surveyed the team's handiwork. "This ain't so tough..."

"Don't underestimate the Darkloids!" Shademan. exe chastised from above them right before a blurry form dove straight for Hub from the haze above. "Wheee!"

But as he was about to strike, a massive gray form interposed itself and Shademan. exe's talons clanged off of the armor and he

retreated back into the haze quickly before anyone could retaliate.

"Thank you," Hub said gratefully.

"Such is the duty of a knight," Knightman. exe replied.

In the area of Den City known as Beach Street, a shoreline drive that included the DNN broadcasting station as well as a state of the art hospital, a boy with black and white hair waited to meet the one who had called him with a seemingly urgent matter. Of course, she had to sneak off the boat she'd stowed away on first. After the owner had left to enter the building the boy, one Chaud Enzan, stood before.

As if the thought summoned her, Chaud spotted the girl, one Mayl Sakurai, approaching his position.

Chaud's only concession to surprise when he spotted Lan's girlfriend was a raised eyebrow. "Nice bikini."

"Yeah, well," the girl blushed, "I didn't exactly have time to change first. Thanks for coming."

"Don't thank me yet," Chaud warned. "I haven't decided if this is a waste of my time or not. You're just lucky I have official business in the area."

"Lan was right," Mayl crossed her arms in challenge. "You *are* a big sourpuss."

"Whatever works," Chaud shrugged the challenge off. "You still haven't explained why you think this is related to Nebula."

"Right... The woman I spotted was putting a lot of effort into not being spotted–"

"Oran Isle is hardly off limits," Chaud interrupted, but Mayl simply kept going.

"–and she seemed angry at Princess Pride for preventing her from doing something at the mine–"

"Intent to trespass... Possibly worth an investigation considering the circumstances, but still not–"

"–and while I'm listening to her on the way back, she's cursing out everything under the sun for her problems. Her board of directors, that Sunayama guy from the N1 Grand Prix, her father, Princess Pride, DenCity News Network, the Officials, the way the sun is in her eyes, her grade school teachers–"

"Your point?"

"Everything *except* Nebula."

Chaud paused at that last claim. There was nothing inherently incriminating or even remotely illegal about the woman's choice of condemnations. The woman was entitled to her own opinion after all. However, the omission of Nebula from her long list of ire, especially in light of current circumstances, was a gigantic red flag. With Nebula's occupation of the Net, everything was impeded from government to businesses to private life. There were only a few reasons why someone wouldn't be angry at Nebula these days.

"Okay..." Chaud sighed heavily. "We'll investigate quickly, and carefully. If we're caught doing this, then *we* will be the ones in trouble. Not her."

"Wh-whee... Let's party!" Shademan. exe laughed as he dove out of the haze again, this time for a member that the titanically armored Knightman. exe couldn't defend in time.

"Argh!" Colonel. exe cried out as he took a slash across his back. Though he reflexively swung his blade arm at his attacker, Shademan. exe had already vanished back into the haze as rapidly as he'd emerged from it.

"We have to take out the last DarkHoles!" Lan yelled as Hub blasted a BigBrute back into its DarkHole, sealing it. "Gutsman! Knightman! You get the other one!"

"We're on it! GUTSQUAKE!" Gutsman. exe bellowed as he slammed his GutsHammer arms down at the same time Knightman. exe threw his KingdomCrusher into the air. The shockwave along the ground tore through the viruses surrounding the DarkHole while the boulders that fell from above pummeled the TinHawk until it fell back into the DarkHole it had emerged from and self destructed, sealing the final source of the black haze that obscured the cybersky.

With the DarkHoles sealed and no longer belching the black haze, the sky began to clear and gradually reveal the disturbingly warped background of the Nebula occupied zone, as well as the vampiric Darkloid it had hidden from view.

"There's nowhere to run now!" Colonel. exe declared, pointing his blade arm into the slowly dissipating haze.

"Coast is clear," Chaud declared and waved Mayl into the 'employees only' area of an office near the DNN building.

"So... you think this place has something to do with the DNN takeover she was ranting about?" Mayl asked quietly as the two moved in the general direction of a main terminal.

"Possibly," Chaud explained just as quietly. "Several companies are trying to leverage control of DNN, but even in prison and most of his assets seized, Sunayama still owns the majority of shares. And he's refusing to sell."

"Why? I mean, he can't actually use them, right?"

"Sort of," Chaud checked another door and nodded before motioning Mayl into what looked like a server room. "I'll explain more later. For now, we need to find whatever this woman is hiding and get out."

"Alright ya two-bit vampire wannabe! It's clobberin' time!"

"Whee... I didn't expect you to make it so far..." Shademan. exe chuckled as the dark haze obscuring him cleared enough that his position became clear to all. "Or so soon... It is still too early for such a banquet, but I suppose I have no choice... Welcome to the party of darkness!"

"Foul shade-thing!" Knightman. exe accused. "We have you now!"

"Come... give me a taste of your power... A taste I can savor..."

"Well, well..." the female voice declared from the entrance of the room as Mayl and Chaud turned to see a brunette woman in a bold red business suit and tastefully made up glare at them with arrogant condescension. "What have we here?"

"It appears to be trespassers," the voice of a new navi agreed behind Roll. exe and Protoman. exe as they whirled to meet him. Both readily recognized him as Magnetman. exe.

"Hello Tesla Magnus."

"Magnus?" Mayl started in recognition. "As in Gauss Magnus? The man who almost crashed that plane Lan was on?"

"You!" the woman hissed over the connection. "Chaud Enzan! It's all your fault! You and that horrid Lan boy with the blue navi!"

"What happened to your father was his own fault for trying to commit an act of net terrorism," Chaud replied evenly.

"I could care less about you arresting my father! He deserved what he got! But what happened after was all your fault! I was supposed to succeed my father as head of the company, but his arrest made the board doubt my fitness! I've had to claw my way to where I am

now tooth and nail! You wouldn't believe the stress I'm under! My lovely hair nearly fell out and it's ruined my beautiful skin!"

"... *Seriously?!* " Mayl gaped. The woman looked groomed to a perfection most would envy. And how was any of that Chaud's fault? Or Lan's for that matter? (19)

"Sounds like an excuse to us," Chaud humphed.

"Magnetman!" Tesla fumed. "Trash those interlopers for me! Finally! A chance to burn some stress off!"

"Anything, Miss Tesla," the large red magnet-themed navi replied as he hovered in the cyberscape.

"Here he comes Roll!"

"Protoman, get ready! Battle Routine, set!"

"Execute!"

"Max Magnet Power!"

"Apollo?" Hephaestus blinked as the sun god's failure to make any cheesy vampire puns registered. "What are you–"

"Hmm?" Apollo looked up from his own view of a completely different set of events, and his tub of popcorn, to see Hephaestus halfway between a look of surprise and a fierce glower.

" *Why* didn't you let me know about this development the moment you spotted it?"

"Umm… The Great Apollo thought you knew about it?" (20)

Hephaestus folded his arms. "More like you were hoping for a cat fight for your personal enjoyment."

"You said it, the wise Apollo didn't," Apollo hastily pressed the delete key before Hephaestus could see the partial subconscious message he'd been composing.

"We'll give you a taste alright!" Colonel. exe had yelled, throwing his cape over Shademan. exe's form as the vampiric navi charged at them. "Blind Rain Rush!"

With that, Colonel. exe and Hub had charged at the blinded Shademan. exe to attack up close, only to be surprised when the darkloid's form had shattered under their assault and the resulting quartet of cyber bats had emerged from under the cape to flap away.

"What tha?" Gutsman. exe blinked in surprise and astonishment at the sight.

"Despicable creature!" Knightman. exe bellowed as he flung his mace at the beasts, dispersing one of them while Hub and Colonel. exe shot two more out of the sky, but the fourth got away and reformed into Shademan. exe a short distance away.

"Surprised? Wh-wh-wheee!" the reformed Shademan. exe chuckled. "Realizing you've never faced me at my full strength? Wh-whee... Face it Megaman! You still aren't good enough to beat me!"

"We'll see about that!" Hub challenged as he began firing his MegaBuster rapidly, causing Shademan. exe to sneer as the hits did damage to him. Minor damage, but damage nonetheless.

"Such scratches are beneath me," Shademan. exe growled as he snapped his fingers and caused a navi-sized clawed hand to emerge from the ground and swipe at Hub. "You'll need to do better tha–"

"GutsPunch!" the bellow from behind cut off Shademan. exe's taunting as the massive fist of Gutsman. exe, having circled around to flank the Darkloid, slammed into Shademan. exe's back... and

through the shadow form he melted into in the next moment.
"Wha...?" Gutsman. exe's eyes widened in shock.

"Wh-wh-wheee..." the vampiric Darkloid's chuckle sounded as the shadow form melted into the tainted ground. "I thought I recognized you... Such mindless brawn... One of those needlessly filling side dishes that tried to keep me from that troublesome dessert..."

"Don't..." the brawny navi tried to sound defiant as the disembodied voice echoed around the Nebula-controlled area, but the fear crept in anyway.

"Don't what? Say what is true? Wh-whee..." the voice echoed sinisterly across the tainted cyberscape. "All the pathetic little navis who live in the light are my food. No amount of strength can change that. Not yours. And not Megaman's."

"Here we go!" Tesla shouted with a manic look on her face as her navi Magnetman. exe opened by laying a grid of magnet panels in the cyberscape before launching a series of magnet-shaped missiles at his two opponents.

"Watch out Roll!" Mayl called, prompting her navi to teleport out of the way even as Chaud directed Protoman. exe to sidestep the missiles, even as they changed direction mid-flight, with ease.

"MagnetBall!" Magnetman. exe bellowed as he charged up a crackling ball of dark purple magnetic energy and threw it at them. It moved slowly, but it tracked their positions as it did. And then Roll. exe found herself stuck in place. Looking down, she spotted a field of purple magnetic energy on the ground below holding her in place as the magnetic ball inched towards her.

"Ohohohoho! How easy you're making this!" Tesla laughed condescendingly.

"Not so fast!" Mayl retorted as Roll. exe broke free and easily sidestepped the magnet ball, which proved unable to completely reverse direction. "Boomer chip in! Download!"

"StepCross! Battlechip in! Download!" Chaud declared at the same time.

Tesla cursed as she directed Magnetman. exe to backstep from Protoman. exe's charging attack, and put him directly in the path of the wood-element Boomer chip.

"RollArrow!"

"Shockwave!"

"Magnet Barrier!"

A forcefield sprung up around Magnetman. exe to absorb the attacks.

"Finish it, Magnetman!" Tesla ordered. "North-South Tackle!"

Suddenly Magnetman. exe was in line with Roll. exe and charging straight at her in a shoulder rush that put the larger navi's bulk to good use. Along with a blue copy of him from the other direction.

"AntiDamage!" Mayl cried out and sent the chip with not a moment to spare. The impact from both directions hit only a dummy as the real Roll. exe threw a giant shuriken in response and Protoman. exe unleashed a Slasher chip in retaliation to the charging attack.

"Hmm..." Tesla's eyes narrowed. "It seems you both do have skill after all... Very well! Magnetman! Time to stop playing around!"

"Yes, Miss Tesla!"

Mayl and Chaud directed their navis to regroup and ready themselves for the next attack, but as they did Mayl noticed that Tesla's demeanor seemed to change. Before she had seemed to

care little that it was the two of them (well, mostly Chaud) that had broken in, seeing them as little more than targets for the rest of the anger she carried around. Now... now she actually seemed focused on their fight.

"Show yourself base coward!" Knightman. exe challenged, looking around for any sign of the darkloid, ready to throw his mace as soon as the blackguard showed itself.

"Wh–"

Colonel. exe whirled to slash as the sound, and hit only a minor virus that had crawled up from some remaining dark ooze, liberating a minor chunk in the backwash.

"wh–"

Hub whirled this time, using a sword chip to bisect a darkly tainted mettaur in the middle of trying to attack him.

"wh–"

Hub's eyes widened as he and Lan reacted in unison. That had been right behi–"gurk"

"wheee..." Shademan. exe finished chuckling from where he'd thrust his taloned hand right through Hub's chest. He was still halfway through reforming from the shadows.

"Megaman!" Gutsman. exe cried in alarm.

"Oh god! Lan!" Princess Pride's alarmed scream was heard over the connection.

"Lan?" Dex froze as he saw what had happened. The moment that vampire navi had hit Megaman. exe like that, a gaping wound had

appeared on Lan's own chest and started bleeding furiously. He'd heard of the dangers associated with Full Synchro, but the feedback of a navi's pain had never seemed that big a price to pay to him. The pain he'd felt while synched with Gutsman. exe had always faded with no real lasting effect. To see this happen...

"Hold on, Lan!" Princess Pride began tearing strips off of her shirt to start making a bandage.

Hephaestus recoiled in shock as the Anchor was hit with what could have been a mortal wound had it not been induced wholly from sensational feedback. It was fortunate that the young woman present knew first aid or the boy could have easily bled out despite the wound itself being just a flesh wound.

Looking over at the success chance, he further goggled as the numbers shot up and down like they were noting the position of a Richter needle in real time during a major earthquake. (21)

"Why do I have to learn this?"

"As princess, it is your duty to look after the people of Creamland. Whether that means defending their interests as a whole on the political stage or dedicating yourself to binding the wounds of a single citizen. They are your people and your purpose is to see to their defense in every way you are capable. The job of myself and the rest of your tutors is to see that you are as capable in as many ways as possible."

Princess Pride did her best to bandage Lan up, silently thanking her old tutor for insisting she learn every level of first aid possible.

"Ohgeezohgeez," the larger boy, Dex, nearly hyperventilated nearby as he did his best to keep pressure on the sudden wound Lan had received. "Lan don't you dare die on me!"

"Dex..." Lan groaned.

"Save your strength, Lan," Princess Pride ordered firmly. Hero or not, the boy needed it. There. That would hold long enough for her to get him to the boat and some proper bandages. Then she would see if he needed to be rushed to a hospital.

"Dex..." Lan insisted, gripping the other boy's arm pretty firmly considering his injuries. "You need... to stop Shademan..."

"But..." the larger boy blinked as Lan fumbled an attempt to force his own PET into Dex's hands. He only stopped when the larger boy accepted the item.

"You can do it..." Lan grinned weakly as Pride hefted the boy into the rather ironic princess carry. "After all... you have guts..." (22)

Dex looked like he was fighting back tears as he stood straight and saluted in a manner that would have done the knights of Pride's homeland proud (even if they'd never have been caught dead wearing swim trunks on duty).

"Magnet Missile!"

"Scuttle!"

"Katana!"

"Screen Divide!" Colonel. exe did his best to cover the wounded Megaman. exe as the vampiric darkloid harried the rest of them.

"Megaman! Speak to me!" Gutsman. exe sounded worried.

"Nnnngh!" the blue navi grunted as static sparked over his form, emanating from the gaping hole in his chest. "C-can't... mov-ve..."

"Knightman!" Colonel. exe ordered, taking charge of the situation. "Watch over Megam–"

"WHEEEEEEEEEEEE!" Shademan. exe screeched as a massive blast of sound shot from his mouth to drown out Colonel. exe's words as it slammed into the military navi, causing his body to jerk and convulse.

"No!" Knightman. exe bellowed, sending a Kingdom Crusher at Shademan. exe, only for the impact to cause the vampiric navi to melt into shadows without any visible sign of damage while Colonel. exe collapsed from the hits he'd sustained.

"C-c-curses..." the military navi shuddered as static gripped his injured form and immobilized him. The emergency jack-out measures every navi tied to a PET had were completely blocked in the darkness-infused zone, otherwise he'd have been automatically logged out rather than have to suffer such serious wounds and be rendered so helpless.

"Two down... wh-wh-wheee..." Shademan. exe's echoing laugh taunted them. "Let's see... who will be next? Perhaps..." Shademan. exe suddenly appeared in front of Knightman. exe, "you?"

"Royal Wrecking Ball!" the massive knight navi swung his chained mace protectively in response, only for the vampire navi to again melt into shadows with the hit. Shadows that moved and flowed to Knightman. exe's back and reformed.

"Yes..." Shademan. exe hissed right before he sunk his vampiric teeth into a seam in Knightman. exe's armor and began siphoning his life force.

"Gnnnnn..." the massive knight tried to struggle, but his heavy bulk left him less able to shake off the persistent foe as he clung. And raising his defense wasn't possible while the vampiric foe was latched onto him.

"G-get..." Megaman. exe's voice struggled just before a series of poorly aimed blasts peppered both Shademan. exe and Knightman. exe both. The former hissed and disengaged so he could turn to strike at the more helpless target, only for a massive fist to pummel him back into the melting shadows again.

"Thank you..." Knightman. exe said to the smaller navi as the brawny Gutsman. exe took up a secondary protective position, and dumped the immobile form of Colonel. exe next to the blue navi.

"Kn-nights... p-p-prot–ngh!" Megaman. exe grinned weakly before the static immobility claimed him again.

"Indeed they do..." the armored navi acknowledged.

"Yeah... but we're gettin' hammered here!" Gutsman. exe declared as he looked around frantically for his opponent. An opponent who calmly reformed a short ways away, looking entirely unconcerned with the two remaining navis.

"Wh-wh-wheee... Such fierce struggles..." the vampire navi smirked arrogantly. "Surely you realize it's pointless by now? I've taken out your best fighters with ease. What hope do you have?"

"We have enough!" the voice of Dex cut in as the boy took over the role of liberation operator. "And we're gonna pound you into the ground!"

"Really now?" Shademan. exe snorted in amusement. "How? I command the power of darkness. It strengthens me. Protects me. Makes me invincible to the feeble likes of you. All you are to me are side dishes to consume."

"We'll show you!" Dex yelled. "Get him Gutsman!"

"Yeeehaw!" Gutsman. exe charged and swung a punch directly at Shademan. exe's face, causing the navi to melt into shadows again rather than receive injury.

"Pathetic..." The vampiric navi reformed quickly a short ways away and formed a trio of red bats that he sent at his larger opponent. "You reall–"

"ROCKET PUNCH!" the flying fist pummeled the bats and forced Shademan. exe back into shadows.

Shademan. exe reappeared behind Gutsman. exe and slashed across the larger navi's back.

"ARGH!"

"Wh-wh-whee... Really now... what did you expect to happen differently?" Shademan. exe chuckled as he dissolved into shadows again due to frantic shots from the GutBuster. "I defeated you easily last time we met even with your friends helping... Without the power of darkness, you can't hurt me... All you can do... is wait for deletion."

"D-dex..." Gutsman. exe backed away nervously. "I... he's..."

"He's full of it Gutsman!" Dex growled back fiercly.

"Oh really?" Shademan. exe drawled. "And what would a boy like yourself know about darkness? You know nothing!"

"Actually," Dex sounded a lot calmer than he had any right to, "I think I've got you all figured out."

"Oh, the mighty Apollo *has* to hear this."

"Do tell..." Shademan. exe grinned arrogantly, not pressing his advantage. Acting as if he had all the time in the world to finish them off.

"Honestly, I wouldn't have figured it out if you didn't talk so much, but yeah, I know all about the secret of your dark power now..." Dex

stated firmly. "The great secret that makes you so 'invincible'."

"And what secret would that be?" the vampiric navi had the tone of those who were curious solely because they desired to know how wrong the other person was.

"It's doubt," Dex declared and Shademan. exe's arrogant grin slipped just the tiniest amount. "You brag so much about being invincible not because you believe it, but because you need *us* to believe it."

Shademan. exe charged with a feral hiss suddenly, but Gutsman. exe, newly resolved met the charge with an uppercut that didn't so much cause Shademan. exe to melt into shadows as it caused him to nearly explode into them.

"Because that's what darkness does," Dex continued with an audible smirk, his theory all but confirmed by Shademan. exe's hasty actions. "It seeps through the cracks and gets into your head. Eats away at your confidence and morals, promising power and more if you let it in. But all it delivers is an easy way out."

"WHEE–" Shademan. exe reformed right in Gutsman. exe's face and unleashed a sonic blast point black at the same time Gutsman. exe slammed both massive palms together over the reforming darkloid.

"The easy way where you don't have to take responsibility for yourself or bother with anyone else. Makes you doubt you can succeed any other way. Makes you so dependent on the easy way that you never realize that you're cutting off all your other options."

Shademan. exe reformed above Knightman. exe this time, and was caught straight on by a Royal Wrecking Ball that caused him to break not into shadows but into a quartet of bats that flew off in different directions.

"'Only those who can overcome darkness after being exposed to it', huh?" Apollo glared at a grinning Hephaestus.

"I stand by what I said," Hephaestus smirked. "It is true, after all."

Apollo just grumbled curses at everyone who spoke of 'certain points of view'. (23)

'Heh...' Hub thought as he forced himself to his feet despite the static. *'So* that's *what changed...'*

He and Lan had been so worried about figuring out a way to hurt Shademan. exe that they'd doubted their ability to do so until they'd purged Roll. exe of his DarkSoul.

"Well, we're through doubting!" Dex yelled as Gutsman. exe slammed Shademan. exe with another punch, this time forcing him apart into shadowy bats.

"We will stand!" Knightman. exe declared as he blasted the vampiric navi into bats with the Kingdom Crusher the moment he reformed.

"We... will... defend..." Hub added as he contributed some buster shots, feeling a resonance pulse between souls as he stood next to Knightman. exe.

"Fools..." Shademan. exe weathered the buster shots with a growl. "I have the darkness!"

"And we have GUTS!" Dex and Gutsman. exe yelled as one as the latter slammed his massive fist into Shademan. exe's back. The vampiric navi's eyes widened comically from the impact before he broke apart into bats once more.

"It'll take more than th–"

The taunt was cut off as Gutsman. exe's fist closed around one of the bats, and the others vanished in puffs of shadows.

"Thanks fer runnin' yer mouth again," the brawny navi said as he clenched his fist around the struggling bat. "Made figgerin' out which one ya were easy."

"I... I can't believe I've..." the bat form of Shademan. exe wheezed out as Gutsman. exe continued squeezing the life out of him, "been disgraced... again! And by... such a... gyaaaahh!"

With a mighty puff of dark miasma from inside Gutsman. exe's fist, Shademan. exe was no more. Within moments, the area claimed by Nebula began to brighten as the darkness permeating it started to dissipate.

"RollFlash!"

"StepSword!"

"Hrgh..." Magnetman. exe grunted from the hit. "Why you...! You don't have me yet!"

"Magnetman, stop right there!"

"But... Tesla!" the magnetic navi protested as Roll. exe and Protoman. exe paused in confusion.

"That was an incredible fight Magnetman," Tesla Gauss sounded so much calmer now. In fact, she almost sounded like a different person... (24) "Ahhh... I must have worked off a decade of stress! I think we can cooperate with these two fine youth now."

"As you wish, Miss Tesla..."

"Ah, mighty Lan..." Apollo lamented. "How excruciating this must be for you! To be in the company of a lovely princess who has torn away her modesty, but have it be due to your own injuries!"

Hephaestus just pinched the bridge of his nose as Chaud began proposing an alliance between himself, Mayl, and Tesla to liberate the Nebula controlled Hades Isle, an area from which they could potentially invade Beach Street as well as one of the back doors into the undernet.

"Do not worry, fallen warrior! The fabulous Apollo will see that it is made up to you!"

Hephaestus had a sinking feeling when he heard that.

"The wise Apollo knows just the thing! Tender bedside care from the lovely Mayl in a hot nurse's un–Ackpbth! Not the *spit* spray bottle! Merc–bth!"

Princess Pride wiped some sweat from her brow. Her shirt was a goner, but it had held long enough for her to find a nice proper first aid kit on the yacht the kids had come on, complete with a rather generous supply of bandages. Enough to stop the bleeding and get Lan stabilized. He still needed a hospital, but it was no longer critical that he get there as fast as possible.

"Nice bra..." Lan complimented weakly before turning a bit less pale in the face. "Geez... I'm glad I can... blame that on the blood loss... And I need to... stop saying stuff out loud..."

"Speaking of which," Princess Pride adjusted her hair so it fell over her front with a mild blush, "you need to rest young man."

"Lan!" Dex burst onto the boat a moment later. "Are you okay?"

"He'll be much better without all the shouting," Pride admonished.

"Er... sorry," the large boy rubbed his head sheepishly before holding up a trio of occupied PETs. "But we won! That vampire is a goner!"

"Indeed," the voice of Knightman. exe intoned. "The blackguard has been most thoroughly trounced!"

"Most excellent," a new voice sounded and Pride turned to look at the face of a brown navi displayed on a control panel. "I trust we can get underway now?"

"Sure thing Glide!" Dex grinned. "We're all here now!"

"Mostly," the named navi corrected. "It seems miss Mayl has had a bit of an adventure while you were busy and has already returned to the mainland." The formal-sounding navi held up his hand to forestall the complaint already half-formed on Dex's lips. "I have received a follow-up message stating that all is well. She should be there to meet us when we dock."

"Interesting defenses," Magnetman. exe mused as he spotted the row of heavy digital artillery.

"And hard to get past without any sort of opening," Protoman. exe nodded.

"Are you ready to take over navi operation when they get in?" the voice of Chaud asked.

"Yes," the voice of Mayl replied hesitantly. "I mean, if you're sure that I'm–"

"He won't be if you keep doubting yourself, girl," the voice of Tesla teasingly chided.

"Yes," Mayl corrected much more firmly. "I'm ready."

"Good. I'm curious to see how strong you've gotten. Now. Let's go!"

"Magnet Barrier!"

"This may actually be more fun to watch the second time..." Apollo mused. "It would be even more fun if you let the mighty Apollo down now."

"Can you promise beyond any shadow of a doubt that you won't put inappropriate ideas in the mortal's heads?"

"Er... Define 'inappropriate'..."

"Great kami..." Mayl gasped as she saw the tainted cyberscape within the Nebula-controlled Hades Isle area.

"I know..." Roll. exe agreed. Even the former Gospel navi Magnetman. exe looked ill at the sight. "It's like I can taste pure anguish and torment with every breath..."

"Stay focused..." Protoman. exe admonished them both. "It's time to begin the liberation."

"Right!" Roll. exe took a deep breath and focused on cleansing the taint she'd breathed in with her positivity before letting it out. Opening her eyes, she hardened her resolve to the task before her. "Okay! Let's get go–"

crunch

All three navis paused at the sound and looked towards the source. For Protoman. exe, that was straight down to his feet to see what he'd stepped in.

"Sand panels?" Magnetman. exe wondered in confusion.

"Not even sand traps," Protoman. exe confirmed. "Though there's probably some of those around too."

"Zuuuuwooooo... Zoooohaaa..." (Who dares enter the domain of Desertman?!)

Protoman. exe grimaced as he heard a voice he'd have happily gone the rest of his life never encountering again. (25)

"What's wrong?" Hephaestus asked as Apollo shuddered.

"The disgusted Apollo is remembering the last sand creature he battled," the sun god grimaced. "The embarrassed Apollo was cleaning pieces of said creature from unmentionable places for–"

"Okay, I really didn't need to know that."

"Zaashoooo! Zuooooooooo!" (There is no escape! Desert Mirage!)

"What in the–" Roll. exe and Mayl gasped as the tainted cyberscape changed to an unbearably bright (if a blood red sun and a sinister purple sky could be called such) desert area that wavered and distorted all around them.

"Don't trust your eyes!" Protoman. exe advised them. "Find your opponents by sound and movement!"

"There was a DarkHole several meters to your one o'clock," Mayl reminded them. "Watch out for the flaming dog thing guarding it!"

"Wonder what... Mayl's up to..." Lan wondered as the boat sped back to Beach Street and the dock nearest the hospital. Pride had gone off to see if she could find a shirt that fit. And considering that this was Yai's yacht, that could be a long fruitless search.

"Dunno," Dex mused. "Usually it's you getting messed up in weird stuff without us. I'm still having to pinch myself a bit."

"Hey guys..." Yai's voice sounded out tiredly as she stepped into view, "has anyone seen Mayl? We didn't leave her on the island did– What happened to you, Lan?"

"Mild mishap..." Lan smiled weakly.

"You shoulda seen it!" Dex grinned. "Pride ripped off her shirt to patch Lan up before hauling him back to the boat single-handedly! It was like something out of a TV show!"

"Wait... Princess Pride's on my boat?! Right now?!"

As the latest viral beast collapsed into the swirling sandpit that represented the DarkHoles in the mirage, the illusion wavered to reveal the actual cyberscape, and a large patch of sickly looking sand a short distance away.

"That's the last of them!" Magnetman. exe declared. "Now for whoever's in charge of this giant litterbox!"

"Zeeee..." (That would be me.) the voice like so much grinding sand grumbled as the patch of sickly sand bulged and rippled oddly, forming a head with a gaping black mouth and two eyes glowing a sinister purple as well as two giant blocky hands. "Zuzaaaaa... Zuuukkooooo..." (I'll devour you slowly. You will be buried in my desert forever.)

"We'll see about that!" Magnetman. exe sneered and fired a Magnet Missile at the sand navi's head, only to stare in confusion as the direct hit blew the head into so much sand. "That was eas–"

"Watch it!" Protoman. exe yelled as he rushed in and cut apart a hand that had formed into a lion head and shot at the magnetic navi with great speed. "Desertman is no pushover!"

"Zuuurraaaaaggaaaa!" (Antlion Vortex!)

Suddenly the sand underneath and around the three navis opened into multiple sand traps and tried to pull them under.

"Wait, *that's* Desertman?" Tesla gasped as she saw the navi. "Sunayama's navi?"

"Yes," Chaud nodded as he and Tesla observed Mayl directing the liberation attempt.

"Would it be possible to capture him? Seeing his navi again is the only thing Sunayama actually wants, but no trace of his navi was ever found after the N1 according to my sources."

"Hmm..." Chaud mused. "It'll be difficult given Desertman's nature. But having a captive darkloid to study would be advantageous... Mayl–"

"Already got a plan," Mayl cut the boy Official off. "Trust me. Lan loves to talk about his fights and I've heard plenty about this one. Here we go Roll! Ball! Geyser! Battlechips in!"

"Download!" was all the prompting Roll. exe needed to throw the chips one after the other into the middle of Desertman. exe's tainted sand patch. The geyser of water burst up from the fresh hole in the cyberscape to drench all of Desertman. exe's form, darkening it with wetness.

"Now!" Roll. exe shouted.

"Magnet Slash!" Magnetman. exe and Protoman. exe yelled as the former used his magnetic powers to hold the pieces of Desertman. exe in place while the latter slashed at them. This time instead of being blown away into loose sand, the body of Desertman. exe held together due to the water the Geyser chip had added.

"Program Advance!" Roll. exe shouted as she prepare the follow-up attack. "BubbleSpread!"

"Keep him occupied you two!" Mayl ordered. "Aquaman! Navi chip in! Download! AquaSword! Battlechip in! Download!"

Magnetman. exe summoned an avatar of the pint-sized aqua navi who proceeded to drench Desertman. exe with a giant hose while Protoman. exe slashed with the blade of water.

"Here we go Roll! HolyPanel! Barrier! Repair!"

The area tainted by darkness was suddenly lit by a bright flash of light centered on Desertman. exe's head.

"Interesting trick..." Hephaestus mused as he watched the makeshift purification take place. "Though there can't be much left to save..."

"Lan?! What in the world happened to you?!" Mayl shouted when she spotted her bandaged boyfriend.

"Hey Mayl... just a... scratch..." the bandaged boy replied woozily.

"Just a scratch?! You call this just a scratch?! I'll show you just a scratch..."

Chaud watched as Mayl Sakurai, still in her bikini, angrily followed Lan (being at least half carried by Dex and Princess Pride (26) with Yai trailing behind) down the street towards the hospital.

"Interesting group that," Tesla remarked.

"That they are," Chaud agreed. "Have you thought about my offer?"

"I have... This Nebula group and their occupation of the net has made business exponentially more stressful lately. It would be a great relief to see them taken down a peg or twenty. I accept your offer, mister Chaud."

"Excellent. I'll be in contact with you when the next mission is planned."

"One moment," Tesla interrupted, holding up her PET to display a blank screen save for a single sand-colored pixel. "Are you certain it is fine for me to keep hold of this?"

"Of course," Chaud nodded. "There's not enough there to get any proper data even if any DarkPower remained, and none does. Beyond that, the researchers would shred whatever's left of Desertman's program trying to attain answers that he likely no longer possesses. It is better if you transfer it to a very basic subPET and return it to Sunayama in exchange for... whatever you need from him. The prison will transfer it to where the inmate's navis are kept of course, but..." Chaud trailed off and shrugged.

Inside Tesla's PET, within a tiny stasis sphere, lay a single pristinely pure grain of digital sand. All that was left of the former navi-turned-darkloid.

Pride resisted the urge to stretch as the hospital staff took Lan and rushed him towards a room, his friends following closely. She wasn't sure the borrowed, and small, shirt would take it well.

"M'lady," Knightman. exe interrupted. "A message for you. From someone named Baryl."

"Open it up Knightman," Pride commanded while cataloguing the nearest place to buy a properly-sized shirt for herself.

"Miss," the nurse halted the irate bikini-clad girl as the patient was led further into the hospital, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to step outside. You're creating a disturbance."

"I don't mean to create a disturbance," the girl apologized very politely. "I just need to *knock some sense into my stupid careless boyfriend* !"

The nurse blinked at that, and a moment later her expression slowly grew into a smile. "Your boyfriend, huh? Tell you what. He's going to be overnight for observation and an IV drip, so why don't you come with me and I'll get you something special for when you come back to pick him up tomorrow..."

Hephaestus stared as the nurse handed Mayl a–

"The amazed Apollo was not responsible for that! Honest! How could the upside-down Apollo be when you have not yet released him?"

Mayl blushed crimson and hugged the bag and its contents to her chest as she waited on Yai and Dex to return. There was no way she was going to let anyone see what was in it.

"So..." Roll. exe piped up with a mischievous tone. "Are you going to wear that tomorrow?"

"Ye–no... I don't know..." Mayl blushed even more. She hadn't even known that they *made* nurse's uniforms in her size! Apparently one of the nurses on the staff was really petite and they'd ordered a few too many uniforms for her or something.

"You really should. I bet they'd even let you wheel him out in the morning!"

" *Roll!* "

"There are bands of petty resistors meddling in our affairs..." Dr. Regal noted as he read over the reports. Several occupied areas lost over the last week or so to small bands of determined netnavis and other efforts to claim more of the global network repelled. And not just in Electopia where the Hikari boy would have been expected to make trouble, but all over the world too...

"Rgh... Good for... them..." Dr. Regal's prize captive, the stubborn Dr. Hikari ground out past the pain he must have been in.

"The research must be completed before we're interrupted. Perhaps it's time for you to tell us what we need Dr Hikari. Hmm...?"

"I... don't know... what you're talking... about..."

Dr. Regal sighed at the man's continued defiance. "I'm afraid my patience is not infinite Dr. Hikari... It would be... unfortunate... if I had to show you my bad side. Where was the data that was entrusted to you?!"

"I... don't... know...!"

"Hmm... I suppose it's possible you've forgotten... After all, it has been a while... Perhaps... *this* will jog your memory?"

ZZZHHHKT

"AAAAAAAAIIIIEEEEEEEEEEGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"One little bolt! That's all the just and fair Apollo asks! It won't even be lethal! A small shock to the base of the spine to make the sinister Dr. Regal's bowels–"

"NO! INTERFERENCE!" Hephaestus yelled as he wrestled the sun god away from the terminal, just loud enough that he didn't have to hear the end of that sentence.

"Knightman, won't you take up the good fight and join us? Your defensive powers would be a great asset."

"It is my duty to protect Princess Pride... However, I know what she would say had she not needed to rush off and heal sir Lan. With her

blessing and for the pride of Creamland, I will glady join and defend the innocent from these Nebula blackguards."

"Excellent. And you, Gutsman and Dex... You could also be assets as well. Expect communication from me and my NetOp soon."

Dex huffed as he climbed the stairs of the gigantic skyscraper. He'd have almost preferred a hike up a mountain to see some ancient martial arts master. It would probably have been less tiring... But the message he'd gotten...

You have good potential, Dex Oyama, but you lack training. As your classes have been cancelled and you have no immediate obligations on your time, I am, as your commanding officer of the Nebula Liberation Force codenamed: Team Colonel, requiring you to report to the following address for training. You will bring your PET, your primary chip folder, and clothes for one week. Nothing else. At the request of your assigned trainer, you will also not use the elevator. Do not be late.

– Baryl.

And of course, the address was the very top of one of the tallest buildings in ElecTown... He was gonna die at this rate... He'd been climbing for hours... Or maybe days...! He was gonna faint... He was...

Dex blinked at the number on the door in front of him.

He was here...

"Oh, thank kami!" he gasped and threw the door open with as much force as he could muster. He almost didn't manage it.

"You're late," the voice of a significantly older man stated with disapproval. Dex looked up at the speaker and his jaw nearly hit the floor. If he wasn't so exhausted, he'd have had a fangasm right then and there.

"M-m-m-m-mr. Kaneda?!" he stammered out.

"Wha?!" Gutsman. exe shouted in astonishment from Dex's PET. "Ya mean tha legendary NetOp o' tha legendary Fist navi?!"

"Indeed I am," the man stated with stern evenness. "And you're Dex Oyama. The young boy who hacked our network and swiped the source code for our Punch chip series so he could customize his navi with it."

Dex gulped. He remembered that now... He'd had to agree to let them use Gutsman. exe's likeness on their chips to stop them from confiscating his navi...

"It is time to honor the other half of the bargain we struck with you back then. You were allowed to keep the stolen data as part of your navi in exchange for the use of his image on the Punch chip series. Now it is time you became a NetOp *worthy* of such a navi..."

"It is time you learned the ways of those who practice the noble art of the Fist," a powerful voice spoke from Mr. Kaneda's own PET. (27)

Mayl breathed out as she finished her hike to the shrine. The place was a little out of the way, but it was absolutely breathtaking!

"I can see a great deal of potential in the two of you. However, it's still largely untapped. You need training. Go to this address. I... know the people there. They can help you improve. Remember, a navi's abilities alone can only go so far. To reach the fullness of your potential, you must train yourself as well. And since your classes are currently canceled, this is the best time for it."

"Greetings and welcome to the Sutā Jinja," a shinto priestess not much older than Mayl herself greeted. "I am Andou Igarashi, and this is my navi Stargirl." (28)

"Hiya!" a voice from the priestess's PET chirped.

"Stargirl? Odd... Lan once mentioned fighting a Starman..." Mayl blinked. "Sorry. I'm Mayl Sakurai and this is my navi Roll. Chaud sent us."

"Of course he did," Andou smiled. "This is one of his favorite places to come and train. And it's funny you should mention Starman. I developed Stargirl after finding the data remains of such a navi."

"My predecessor was cruelly deleted in a cyber-attack on the shrine," Stargirl explained. "And I think I recall bits and pieces of fighting a blue navi from partial memory data my previous incarnation still possessed, along with his abilities. But I myself am a different navi."

"In any case, let's get you settled and plan out your training. Chaud tells me your navi uses arrows?" At Mayls nod, Andou gestured to a distant area of the shrine. "We'll get you started on archery then. It will not only help you better execute such attacks with your navi, but also improve focus. I also sense a powerful aura around you. If you'd like, I can teach you the ways of the priestess as well."

"I think I'd–" Mayl started, only to be cut off by a commotion from nearby.

"Lilly! What have I told you about putting sake in your water bottle?!"

"My apologies," Andou sweatdropped as a girl dressed in a different style of priestess garb came dancing drunkenly out while a voice from her PET yelled for her to get a hold of herself. (29) "My cousin from Scissor Island is staying here as well with a few friends. The network of her island was taken over by that Nebula group. Between you and me, she's been trying to break back in and kick them out."

"Maybe I can help a bit with that while I'm here..."

Lan yawned and stretched as he skated around town. It was strange how empty the place felt with his friends off doing... whatever they

were doing. Shortly after he'd been released from the hospital with instructions to take it easy (while trying to ignore how good Mayl looked in the nurse uniform she'd gotten somewhere as she wheeled him out (30)), his friends had all packed up on trips.

Dex was off on something he claimed was top secret, likely meaning Baryl had something to do with it. Mayl had said she was going to a shrine to pray for the return of Lan's dad, but Lan suspected there was an ulterior motive there. He may have been a bit out of it from blood loss, but he recalled seeing her with Chaud and Tesla when they'd gotten back. Heck, even Yai had gone off with her father to learn more about her family's business. Mary and Kai were still missing and Nanako was managing Higsby's all by herself while Higsby was who-knew-where. He'd even tried looking in on some of his other friends from school, like Tory Froid, only to learn that most of them were out of town visiting relatives.

To put it simply, Lan was bored out of his skull. He was so bored that he was not only caught up with his homework, he'd worked ahead and gotten everything done that Ms. Mari had left them while school was canceled (31).

He'd given serious thought to looking in on Mamoru or Sean, but the former was likely busy with his secret job as undernet administrator in light of recent events, and he had no idea where to even start trying to find the latter. What was Sean up to lately anyway?

Sean narrowed his eyes at the familiar navi controlling the Nebula area of the net in Kotobuki. He'd expected to run into familiar faces when he'd decided to put together a team to take on Nebula, but he'd never expected it to be like this.

"Ho-hooo! Look who came to visit..." the blue navi with a large fan in his chest laughed. "If it isn't our old friends..."

"Airman?" Sean tensed upon recognizing the navi of one of his former Gospel subordinates. "Why are you working with Nebula?

Why would you leave Arashi like that?"

"Leave? Ho-ho-ho!" Airman. exe laughed uproariously. "Leave he says! Hilarious!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes it is!" a new voice laughed that Sean also recognized, and his blood ran cold.

"Arashi?" he gasped as the image of the man's face was projected into the tainted cyberscape.

"Bloody..." Mr. Match's eyes widened as he observed over Sean's shoulder, flanked by another former member of Gospel known as Speedy Dave.

"Like my new look?" the unhinged voice of Arashi Kazefuki chuckled darkly, as he turned to show off the extensive scarring on one side of his face extending down his neck and under his shirt. "You should... After all, you're responsible for it, *aren't* you 'Lord Gospel'?"

Sean grit his teeth as the man he'd once tried to blow up for failing his mission laughed with even less sanity that Sean had possessed when he'd tried to kill him.

"You... you're the one who took Anetta!" a plant-green navi with a white and pink flower for a head and thorny vines growing out of his back accused from within the cyberscape, right before being blown back by a blast of wind from Airman. exe.

"Careful Plantman," a crimson navi with gold trim and boomerang-shaped blades extending from his wrist, as well as one cresting his forehead, appeared in a blur of speed to catch the other. "We can't rescue Anetta if you get yourself deleted foolishly."

"So what if I did?" Arashi laughed. "She wanted to save the planet, and that's what Nebula's doing! I think you of all people might sympathize, Dave."

"This isn't saving the planet!" the former environmental terrorist growled out. "It's–"

"Save your breath," Sean ordered and Dave immediately ceased talking.

"Aye..." Mr. Match glared as both his navis, Fireman. exe and Heatman. exe, stood with Sean's own navi Freezeman. exe in the cyberscape facing down the arrogant wind-user. "It's clear he doesn't care one whit. A man like that is in this for revenge and nothing else..."

"How astute!" Arashi and Airman. exe laughed together. "Nebula promised us a chance to get revenge, and we both took it gladly! You tried to blow us up and now we'll blow you off the face of the earth! Do it Airman!"

"Ho-ho-ho! Gladly! Triple Tornado!"

"Ice Shield!"

Lan sighed as he sat down in the ACDC park. Whatever Sean was doing, Lan hoped he was alright.

"Lan the netbattler..." a voice sounded behind him, causing Lan to whip around and face the speaker. (32) The man was dressed in a purple tunic over black pants and had his back partially to Lan, and stared at the younger boy out of an eye that had a long scar over it but nonetheless was sharp and alert.

"What do you want?"

"No need to get all riled up," the man dismissed lightly despite keeping his piercing gaze on Lan. "I am not here to harm you. I am merely here to see the power you both possess. You and Megaman."

"Why should I show you anything?"

"Hmm? I see... Perhaps you don't have anything to show?"

Lan grit his teeth. It was painfully obvious the man was trying to rile him up, but dang if it wasn't working... "Alright, fine... What do you propose?"

"Nothing much... Just that you jack into this squirrel's network and find my navi. We've set up a little obstacle course for you. I wonder... How fast can you manage it?"

"Aaaaaahhh! What should the talented Apollo play for this occasion?!"

"How about ninja music?"

"Excellent suggestion brother! One question though... What is ninja music?"

"The kind you don't hear."

Inside the squirrelcomp, Hub stared at the familiar face after a rather short bout of navigating the makeshift maze, the search made all the easier from a few rounds of hide and seek he and his friends had played in the same network.

"I never thought I'd be defeated...! Dark... This is mortifying!"

"So you're Shadowman's operator..." Lan considered the scarred man in front of him. "I thought so."

Other than an involuntary blink, the man betrayed no sign of surprise. "Oh? And why would you think that?"

"His navi symbol is on your back... Dark Miyabi."

"...You seem very well informed, Lan Hikari."

"I have interesting friends," Lan replied, thinking of Sean again.

"Indeed... Shadowman, return."

"At once!" the ninja navi replied as he jacked out.

"Lan, you seem more competent than I expected, but you still rely more on your navi's abilities than your own. It will be an uphill battle against Nebula from here if that continues."

"Good thing you aren't working for them then," Lan crossed his arms pointedly. "And besides, Hub and I work best together."

"Hub...? Ah... I see... that is what you call Megaman now... Interesting. Very well, I shall take my leave with this warning. Dr. Regal seeks something your father possesses. Something that, if he were to gain, would spell doom for everyone. Innocent and mercenary alike."

With that, Dark Miyabi threw a smoke bomb at his feet and in the instant he was concealed from view, he was gone.

"Mercenary warriors hailing from the land of Sudanlee–"

"There is no such place in this universe, Apollo..."

"They are the Sudanlee ninjas!" (33)

Lan blinked as he finished reading Chaud's e-mail about Nebula agents still active in Oran Isle's network. Hadn't he done that mission with Colonel. exe? And... that had been Dark Miyabi earlier with Shadowman. exe, right?

Oh, well, he'd figure it out later. Taking out a few Nebula mooks was just the thing to break up the recent monotony.

As he raced for the metroline to Beach Street and a closer access point to Oran's network, Lan failed to notice a man leaning against the trunk of a tree watching him leave.

"So... this is what you're like when you're on your own... It's hard to believe you were in a world class tournament not too long ago..."

Lan exited the metroline onto Beach Street and looked around for a good spot to jack in from. What he spotted was a familiar face attempting to charter a boat.

"Hey! Mr. Famous!" he called out to the man wearing sunglasses and a labcoat over a sports uniform.

"Hey, Lan!" the navi expert greeted and headed over. "I can already guess what you're going to say: What am I, the famous Mr. Famous doing trekking out to an abandoned island?"

"Something like that," Lan grinned at the man's attitude.

"As it so happens, I have been developing an anti-Nebula navi to help my star apprentices free areas of the net under Nebula control. Unfortunately..."

"Let me guess, he won't listen to you?"

"Or anyone else," Mr. Famous sighed. "He's certainly willing to take on Nebula, but he seems to think he knows everything and just goes off on his own. I fear he may try to become an independent navi and attempt to face Nebula by himself."

"Which can't possibly end well," Lan nodded.

"Hey!" an insulted voice piped up from Mr. Famous's PET. "I can tackle those Nebula chumps with one arm tied behind my back!"

"Yeah, right," Hub scoffed back from Lan's PET. "They'd eat you alive."

"I dare you to say that to my face! I'll sack you so hard it'll uninstall your RAM!"

"I think I see the problem..." Lan sweatdropped.

"Big talker, huh?" Hub shot back. "You and me, right here, right now!"

"I'm sorry," Lan blinked, feeling a strange sense of role reversal, " *how* many times have you told me to not lose my cool over something *exactly* like this?"

"Gladly!" Famous's navi laughed. "Assuming your NetOp will let you out of your playpen to rumble with the big boys!"

"Actually, I think this might be exactly what Gridman needs..." Mr. Famous mused. "A hard lesson in the limits of relying solely on one's own strength would do him good."

Lan looked between Mr. Famous and both PETs for a few seconds as Gridman. exe and Hub kept trading trash talk. "Ah, what the heck... We've got a few minutes to kill."

"Alright! Hut-hut HIKE!" (34)

Apollo was dressed as a mortal sports announcer and doing his level best to fray Hephaestus's last nerve.

"The trash-talking Gridman throws a long bomb at the nimble Megaman, and oh does it ever live up to the literal definition folks! Just look at that crater!"

"Stop that..." Hephaestus growled.

"Oh, but before the titanic Gridman can reclaim the ball, the amazing Megaman grabs it and nimbly leaps over a quarterback sack! He

thumbs his nose at the smoldering Gridman and heads for the goal!"

"Stop that or else..."

"He's going for the thirty! The twenty! He's at the ten! The five! TOUCHD-" The mighty Apollo then fell over, gagging and trying to get the unmentionable in his mouth out.

"I warned you to stop that," Hephaestus scowled. (35)

"I think that's the last of them Chaud," Lan spoke into his PET's phone as Hub stood at the far end of the formerly occupied area of Oran Isle's network. Where the net linked to Scilab.

"Good work, Lan. Oran Isle's network is an important strategical location from where we'll be launching our bid to liberate the Nebula-held portions of Scilab's own network. There are multiple entrance points into the area under Nebula's control, likely to facilitate the coming and going of their own forces, but the ones nearest to Scilab's inner network are the most well defended."

"And if we came at them from that direction, it would mean we were dropping Scilab's own defenses to do so."

"Correct. This is why we need to take advantage of outside links and backdoors to stage our liberation of Scilab's network."

"Okay, we'll get right on it Ch–"

"Fat chance!" a new voice challenged.

"–right after we take care of the last guy who's been tailing us while we took out his Nebula buddies," Lan finished.

"Yeah! I..." the HeelNavi tripped over nothing as what Lan said registered. "Liar! There's no way you knew I was there! I'm gonna delete you for trying to make a fool out of me!"

"Yeah, right..." Hub sighed. "Lan?"

"Got you covered, bro," Lan grinned. "DrillArm, sacrifice for unison chip! Battlechips in, download!"

"DoubleSoul!" Hub yelled as the massive purple form of Knightman.exe coalesced around him and burst in a sound of metal striking metal to reveal Hub clad in thick purple armor, bearing a shield on one arm and a spiked mace on the other.

"Ha! A pretty trick, but no match for my viruses!" the HeelNavi laughed and summoned a series of Battys and a couple of Mettaurs. "Destroy him my pretties! You'll regret messing with Nebula!"

"AirHockey!" Hub yelled as he dashed forwards at the viruses as they opened fire, his shield becoming a hockey puck that he threw even as the viruses' shots pinged harmlessly off of his armor.

"W-wha?" the HeelNavi stuttered in surprise as his viruses were destroyed by the rampaging hockey puck. "No... I... I refuse to lose to the likes of you! DARKSWORD!"

"AirHockey!"

The HeelNavi jumped over the deadly puck, but his darkness-fueled blade still clanged uselessly off the armor of his opponent. Armor that pulsed with invulnerability like that granted from a Trumpy the member of Nebula noticed too late.

"Royal Wrecking Ball!"

The spiked mace slammed into the HeelNavi so hard that both he and the world spun around and around.

"N-Nebula... is... almighty..." the punch-drunk and dizzy HeelNavi tried to state defiantly, but the effect was ruined by the fact that he couldn't stand straight.

"AirHockey!" was the last thing he heard.

"Well, well... They're not half bad when they get going..." another navi who'd been following Megaman. exe much better than the HeelNavi mused as he watched the two leave. "Gets me raring to go..."

"Sorry, Chaud," Lan apologized as he and Hub took in the cloud of DarkPower covering the entrance like some sort of perverse fog. And was it his imagination, or was the dark cloud slowly expanding? "I know you said this was the least defended entrance, but what they do have is impassable. Unless Protoman's got a pair of wings stashed away somewhere under his ponytail, I don't think we're getting through."

"Odd..." Chaud murmured. "He was supposed to meet you there... Whatever. Jack out for now while I look into this..."

"Aaannndd they're back to being pitiful..." the watching navi shook his head sadly as Megaman. exe jacked out.

"Keep watching them," the voice of the man who'd watched Lan leave for Beach Street ordered. "We'll see if they were worth the trip sooner or later..." (36)

"Curiouser and curiouser..." Shadowman. exe mused as he watched the navi tailing Megaman. exe. "Your orders, Dark?"

"Continue observation Shadowman. We shall see how this plays out before we make a move..."

"But who shall watch the watcher who watches the watcher?"

"...us?" Hephaestus hazarded a guess.

"None other!"

– navi came and challenged me to a battle. He said he wanted to test our abilities, but instead he stole some of Magnetman's vital programs! I hardly know you, but Miss Sakurai recommended you ever so highly when I told her, so would you please help me?

– Tesla Gauss

Lan glared at the thin blonde Netopian who simply grinned back from behind his red-tinted sunglasses. Behind him, Tesla Gauss did the same. Searching out Magnetman. exe's stolen data in the DNN building's network had been different from what he'd expected, but...

"Ngh... I... I never imagined such a day would come... I... Thank you... for restoring me..."

"Dear me!" the man grinned. "Such faces! I freely admit you've got power and technique on your side, but you guys are sorely lacking in speed! Even that Dex kid managed to put up a better fight than the big red guy!"

Lan blinked in astonishment. "You know Dex?" he asked while filing the speed claim in the back of his head to tell Mayl and Roll. exe later. Maybe they could take the guy's ego down a notch on that front.

"Beat me and Gyroman by *that* much in one of the Blue Moon exhibition matches," the man held his thumb and forefinger barely a millimeter apart. "Said nothing but good things about you and your navi though. Made us itch to take a shot at you ourselves so bad we hopped a flight on out here right before Nebula took over. But... well..."

"What?" Lan demanded. This was a lot different from what he recalled in his conflicting memories.

"You two are kind of lame, really," the man shrugged and turned away. "See ya around, kid. Tah-tah!"

"The stupendous Apollo doesn't know what it is, but he likes this guy..." the sun god mused as he tried on some red-tinted shades himself. "The confidence? The casual poise?"

"The way he reminds you of yourself?" Hephaestus deadpanned.

"That's it!"

'Oh, boy...' Lan moaned to himself as he finished looking up the man's information, preceded by watching a recording of his match with Dex. *'I cannot believe I forgot that... Dex bragged about that match for days to anyone who would listen.'*

Charlie Airstar, former member of the ace helicopter group, the Red Thunders, and pilot for hire. Well, at least now he had an excuse to know the man's name after coming across so ignorant earlier. Especially since Chaud claimed to be tied up looking into another matter. Same with Baryl. Which was also different from what Lan recalled. Ugh... how long before he had no idea what was going on anymore?

Well, at least he knew what to do now. Stop Nebula from retaking Oran Isle's network.

Baryl grumbled to himself as he dialed the contact number again. It rang, rang, and then there was finally the tell-tale click of the call being answered.

"What is it? I am busy."

"Why haven't you reported in yet? The mission to liberate Scilab was supposed to start yesterday! *Before* they could mount their current

offensive!"

"I am dealing with a personal matter. I will contact you when it is resolved."

click

Baryl twitched.

"Finally done your homework and looked up me and Charlie, eh?"

"Yeah, we know all about you and Charlie Airstar!"

"Ha ha! Excellent! Now we all know each other! You can just call me Charlie, though."

"What's your game?"

"Tell you what, you catch Gyroman and I'll tell you whatever you want to know kid!"

"Here I go! GyroForm! Catch me if you can!"

"Wait! Damnit! We don't have time for this!"

Hub twitched as he finally finished vacuuming up the last of the cyber clouds infesting the net from Oran to the connected Scilab area.

"Hey, you're not half bad at this! Come on, let's see if you can keep it up!"

He twitched some more as he spotted the yellow helicopter navi that had gleefully led him on the long chase, making him vacuum up all of the cyber clouds that Nebula had sent out as the precursor to their impending attack.

"Starting to slow down there a bit! I wonder if you'll make it all the way!"

And seemingly not doing anything to stall the invasion himself.

"Running away? Pfft... I could take you anytime I want–"

"Not now Gyroman. There's still fun to be had in our little game of tag after all!"

"Roger that!"

"Are you quite through playing around?" Hub glared at the helicopter navi.

"What do you think, Charlie?" Gyroman. exe pretended to give the matter serious thought.

"Eh... I suppose the grunts hiding in the clouds were a decent enough warm-up," the man stated with a shrugging tone.

"Wait... you were fighting Nebula's agents all this time?"

"Fighting is such a strong word for such pathetic forces. 'Cleaning up' would be more appropriate."

"And even in that you are lacking," a new voice interrupted as Shadowman. exe appeared in a puff of smoke. "After all, you missed half of them. We did not."

"What... Shadowman?" Hub blinked, looking between the ninja navi and the helicopter navi rapidly.

"Hey, nice entrance!" Charlie's grin was evident.

"You've been spying on us all this time, haven't you?" Lan accused.

"Of course," the voice of Dark Miyabi answered. "We needed to see if you had what it took after all. Nebula is a powerful force. Not just

anyone could take them on and survive. You need information to combat their forces, not just speed."

"Heh... Big talk for someone who lurks in the shadows like a coward," Gyroman. exe taunted.

Shadowman. exe stiffened at the insult, but said nothing.

"Better than one who blows hot air and empty boasts," Dark Miyabi returned evenly.

"You want a piece of us?" Charlie growled.

"Um..." Hub tried to head off the train wreck he saw happening in front of him.

"You are not worth our time," Shadowman. exe ignored Hub to glare straight at Gyroman. exe.

"You wanna say that again?" Gyroman. exe sneered as the helicopter blades on his back whirled dangerously.

"If you wish a fight, I suppose we could oblige you," Dark mused calmly. "Get ready Shadowman."

"Yes, Master!"

"Here we go Gyroman!" Charlie yelled.

"This'll be fun!"

"What the heck do you two think you're doing?" Lan and Hub watched the two navis square off against each other.

"Battle routine, set!" Dark Miyabi declared stoically.

"Execute!" Charlie Airstar returned with a grin.

"It was a fluke I tell you!" Gridman. exe complained.

"You didn't land a single hit," Mr. Famous raised his eyebrow. "How is that a fluke?"

"It would have been different if it was a Nebula agent..." the navi of the gridiron grumbled.

"Really now?" Mr. Famous prodded.

"Yeah! I'd have punted them halfway across the net before they could blink! Like that hero navi you told me about! He never needed anyone's help!"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure he'd disagree with you. Probably on principle after you called him... well all sorts of impolite things really."

"Wait, that was him? Seriously? You're not pulling a Lucy on me, are you?" (37)

"Oh, that was them all right," Mr. Famous made sure to emphasize the plural pronoun. "And they've needed plenty of help to do everything they've done. And even when they don't have their friends by their sides, they still have each other to rely on. Neither of them would have pulled off half of just what I've told you about if they didn't have that."

"Yeah, yeah... I get it already..."

"So you'll start listening to me now?"

"...I'll think about it."

"Ninjas versus helicopters!" Apollo gushed as he watched the two mercenary navis duel. "It's the most awesome match-up the amazed Apollo never knew he wanted to see!"

"Bakuen!" Shadowman. exe yelled as he and his two kage bunshin (38) each threw lines of explosions at their opponent.

"Tornado Arm!" Gyroman. exe formed a horizontal whirlwind that blew out the line of explosions headed for him and allowed the others to pass right by.

One of Shadowman. exe's clones vanished to reappear behind Gyroman. exe to slash at him with a sword, only for the blade to be deflected by the whirling helicopter blades and the clone dissipated from the blade being deflected through his chest.

"Gyro Cutter!" the helicopter navi threw a whirling helicopter blade that passed through the other clone and then angled itself at the real Shadowman. exe.

"Kawarimi!" the shinobi navi declared as he activated an AntiDamage ability to replace himself with a paper doll likeness and threw a massive shuriken at his opponent.

"Gyro Counter!" Gyroman. exe jumped up over the attack and turned into his helicopter form before firing a Vulcan-style machine gun at the newest kage bunshin Shadowman. exe had formed. "Bomb Raid!"

"Muramasa!"

As Gyroman. exe flew forward and dropped bombs, Shadowman. exe dashed forwards as well and sliced them in half.

"Not bad!" Gyroman. exe complimented with a grin.

"Hmph..." Shadowman. exe scoffed, but there was a slight gleam in his eye.

"Time to finish this!" Charlie declared as Gyroman. exe formed a Gyro Cutter on his arm and got into a charging stance.

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing..." Dark Miyabi intoned as Shadowman. exe readied the Muramasa for a charging thrust.

At the same moment, both navis charged each other, and then a purple form appeared between them with a sound of metal striking metal and a cry of "CUT IT OUT ALREADY!"

The Muramasa clanged off of a sturdy shield while the Gyro Cutter was deflected by a spiked mace and both navis were held at bay by the armored form of Megaman. exe in KnightSoul.

"What the heck is *wrong* with you two?!" Hub grit his teeth and shoved both navis back.

"You are fortunate that Megaman intervened or I would have deleted you for certain," Shadowman. exe glared over the armored form of KnightSoul Megaman. exe.

"Yeah, right, you and what army pajama ninja?" Gyroman. exe snickered right back.

"I shall see you spitted on my blade, you–"

"That is enough Shadowman," Dark interrupted. "I have seen enough. Lan and Megaman are worthy, even if these imbeciles are lacking. We shall render our services."

"Hey! Who are you call–"

"Not now Gyroman," Charlie snapped. "As annoying as he is, the ninja guy's right. We came here to see if Lan and Megaman made the grade and they have. We're on the clock now."

"Roger that," Gyroman. exe snapped to attention with only the barest hint of reluctance in his tone.

"Oh boy..." Lan sighed as the two navis stepped back and Hub exited KnightSoul. "Okay, I think I know what's going on here. The only question I have is who hired who?"

" *There* you are!" Colonel. exe declared as he ran up and jabbed a finger at Shadowman. exe. "Why did you not report yesterday?"

"Our test was not complete then," Dark Miyabi replied as Shadowman. exe studiously ignored the irate Colonel. exe. "After all, that was the terms or our agreement was it not?"

"I understood that test to be completed yesterday when you met with the boy," Baryl's voice was just barely on the side of calm.

"As if a mere game of hide-and-seek would give us their measure," Dark Miyabi scoffed. "If I am to travel all this way from my hidden village and operate in the open, we require a better test than a child's game."

"I take it you have a similar explanation?" Protoman. exe asked.

"Yeah, we–GAH!" Gyroman. exe jumped an impressive height when he realized that the voice had come from right behind him. Shadowman. exe simply raised an impressed eyebrow at the scene. "When did you get there?!"

"About when Colonel showed up," Hub shrugged.

"Your explanation, please Charlie," Chaud asked more insistently.

"Eh, we were already in Electopia looking to challenge the kid and a few other locals I'd heard about when you contacted us," the pilot-turned mercenary replied casually. "Figured we'd get a match in as a bonus. Didn't work out that way, but no complaints."

"Indeed," Dark agreed. "Lan and Megaman could still use training, but they shall suffice to combat Nebula."

"Well, I suppose we should get on with our first job," Gyroman. exe grinned.

"Let me guess," Hub offered with a suddenly sinking feeling, "opening the way to the next area to be liberated?"

"Yes," Gyroman. exe and Shadowman. exe replied as one, and immediately glared at each other.

"To be more precise, this shall be a joint liberation mission," Chaud began, getting a snort from Baryl who had likely been about to say the same thing.

"Well, then, I suppose we should get started," a female voice interjected, prompting the group to turn to see four additional navis. The large forms of Magnetman. exe and Gutsman. exe were dwarfed by the even larger form of Knightman. exe, but the relatively small form of Roll. exe was the one who had spoken.

"So, Dex, when were you going to tell me you and Gutsman were on 'Team Colonel'?" Mayl asked from her room at Andou's shrine.

"Uh..." Dex sweated several miles away from where he was worn out for the day from Mr. Kaneda's training regimen and trying to think of a way to explain that he'd been sworn to secrecy. "Hey, wait... When were you going to tell me you and Roll joined 'Team Proto'?"

"Er..." Mayl bit her lip at the comeback. "Okay, that's fair. Allies for asking Lan when he was planning on telling either of us about any of this if we hadn't been invited?"

"Help me figure out how to avoid Yai demanding to know why she was left out and you have a deal."

"So, do you think you can handle it?" Colonel. exe asked Shadowman. exe as both teams stood before the massive cloud of DarkPower.

"No problem!" Gyroman. exe answered instead. "I saw the key point to the whole thing earlier. It'll be a snap! GyroForm!"

"Hmph..." Shadowman. exe sneered as the helicopter navi gained altitude to fly over the before forming a sign with his hands. "Weight of a feather, speed of a hare... Make me light as air!"

With that, Shadowman. exe was off running on top of the cloud at a blistering pace even as Gyroman. exe took off across from the air.

"That is so friggin' awesome!" Dex yelled from where he was observing.

"Yeah!" Gutsman. exe agreed. "Uh... which one?"

"Both of them!"

"Target acquired. It's a DarkChip!" Gyroman. exe informed the group. "Readying GyroBomb!"

"No need," Shadowman. exe snorted as he raced to the target. "It is no match for Muramasa..."

Hub gave Protoman. exe a sideways glance.

"Data can be copied," was all the red navi said. (39)

"Bombs away!"

"Hyah!"

There was the sound of an explosion from the far side of the dark cloud, and in moments it was dissipating back into the net.

"Hah! Got it!" Gyroman. exe crowed.

"I believe you are mistaken," Shadowman. exe scoffed. "My blade struck moments before your bomb."

"Oh yeah? Well your blade obviously wasn't up to the task now, was it?"

"Are they going to be like this the whole mission?" Mayl and Roll. exe asked as more insults were traded. The latter was visibly sweatdropping and the former sounded like she was as well.

"Knowing our luck?" Lan replied. "Probably."

Deep in the corrupted area of Scilab's net, under the massive thunderhead formed completely from DarkPower, the darkloid known as Cloudman. exe frowned as he sensed entry by forces not allied with the darkness.

"Cloudman... Your area will be breached soon... I have special instructions for you should a blue navi named 'Megaman' be among the strike force."

Stretching out his senses, the darkloid of storms examined the interlopers. Several navis of no true worth, a couple of mild concern, one who was a traitor, another who stank of the foul light all proper darkloids despised, and... yes... One blue navi who held captive within him a very powerful DarkSoul...

'I see Dr. Regal... I understand... I will do the duty you expect of me...'

"What in the world are you doing?" Hephaestus asked an Apollo who was hunched over an action figure of the dark storm navi that he'd suddenly produced from somewhere.

"Wait for it brother..." Apollo replied absently as he adjusted something Hephaestus couldn't see. "And... done! What do you think?"

Hephaestus blinked as he took in the alterations to the figure. The armor and thundercloud base were the same as the darkness-tainted mortal navi, but the face...

The face was now a dead ringer for his father Zeus.

"So you can imagine that they're beating up 'dear old dad'," Apollo grinned.

Hephaestus gave an involuntary snort, followed shortly by a low chuckle, that quickly grew into a full belly laugh.

"It seems that they've prepared for us..." Colonel. exe scowled as he looked across the corrupted cyberscape. Above was a massive thunderhead pulsing at irregular intervals with sinister purple lightning. Everywhere, the oozing sludgy darkness bubbled along the ground, with many viruses watching from where they hid within. In the distance, sparking miasma whirled forth from the Dark Holes fueling the corruption of the cyberscape. And between the teams and those Dark Holes were shimmering dark purple barriers.

"Yeah..." Hub agreed, noting a few holes in the barriers. But ones that were spaced irregularly and far apart. It was clearly a design meant more to slow them down than stop them completely. "With those barriers up, this is going to take forever..."

"Good thing you've got me then!" Gyroman. exe grinned and spun the helicopter blades on his back for emphasis. "I'll fly ahead through the openings and destroy the source of the barriers!"

"Hmph..." Shadowman. exe snorted with disdain. "As if an imbecile like yourself could handle such a task. I shall sneak behind enemy lines and bring down the barriers."

"Oh yeah? And just how do you think you'll get across all those DarkPanels?"

"I shall run."

"Yeah, right! Those things will swallow you whole the moment you step on–I do not *effing* believe that..." Gyroman. exe stared as the

ninja navi proved his claim by stepping onto the oozing darkness like it was ordinary ground. "How the *hell* , man?!"

"The secrets of the ninja are many and mysterious," Shadowman. exe replied with amusement.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" a booming voice rumbled like thunder. "So they do not know the truth about you, traitor..."

As the echoes of the voice died down, all eyes turned to a rigidly still Shadowman. exe.

"Explain," Protoman. exe demanded.

"Those who fall prey to the darkness are those who revel in it or become addicted to the power it promises. Those who are born of the darkness may not be the same," Shadowman. exe riddled, neither confirming nor denying anything. (40)

"I knew it!" Gyroman. exe accused with a pointed finger. "He's a spy!"

"I am a *shinobi* ," Shadowman. exe glared right back.

"Several here have pasts they are less than proud of," Knightman. exe stepped between the two mercenaries and pointedly faced the yellow helicopter navi. "Unless and until he proves unworthy of our trust, he shall have mine."

"Come on man, help me out here..." Gyroman. exe turned to the red Magnetman. exe.

"Both Knightman and Shadowman were with Gospel, same as I was," the magnetic navi folded his arms pointedly. "And neither of them stripped me of vital programs like you did."

"By all means, argue amongst yourselves, ha ha!" the massive thunderhead over the area rumbled in time with the darkloid's

laughter. "And when you're done, hurry back! I'll welcome you with thunderclouds!"

"We're wasting time," Hub cut into the brewing confrontation. "Whatever his past, Shadowman's with us now, same as you Gyroman. Both of you are going to go ahead and bring the barriers down for us. We'll catch up."

"Understood," Shadowman. exe nodded.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you..." Gyroman. exe promised.

"Yeesh..." Gutsman. exe sweatdropped as the two mercenary navis sped ahead, one flying above the murky dakness and the other running atop it.

"You said it," Roll. exe agreed with him. "I wonder if anyone else has problems like this..."

"Grr... Stand still already!" a green navi with black pants and clawed blades protruding from the ends of his arms slashed wildly at a hovering beige, black, and red navi with a long nose. "I know you kidnapped Pat you demented wind freak!"

"Ho-ho! I care not for the names of foul Nebula operators! Only where you and your cohorts have secreted away the great sensei Feng-Tian!"

"Shut your lying mouth!" the blade-user slashed again at his opponent.

"I'd like to see you make me!" the hovering navi swiped with a three-pronged blade and created a trio of whirlwinds.

"Cease this at once!" A strong voice demanded and a massive thunderbolt struck between both combatants, forcing them apart.

"Who the hell are you?" the bladed navi growled.

"I am Thunderman," a gray and black navi with orange highlights and a massive needle sticking up from his head introduced himself. Next to him was a cobra-themed navi emerging from a pot and an female navi wearing an outfit of yellow, orange, and blue with pink hands and feet as well as lime green rings formed like twin pigtails. "My companions are Snakeman and Ring. We are the Thunder Tribe, agents working against the likes of Nebula. We are currently investigating the disappearance of NetOps like your own."

"Yeah, then you should help me delete this liar!" the bladed navi sneered.

"Hmph... It is obvious that you are the villain here," the flying navi sneered back.

"Slashman," the female navi identified as Ring. exe began, getting a start from the blade using navi. "NetOp Pat Fahran, a chef in Netopia on business when Nebula occupied the net. Recently discovered missing from her hotel room."

"How did..."

"Tenguman," the girl navi turned to the other one. "NetOp Feng-Tian, elderly martial arts master in Netopia visiting an old training buddy. His friend recently returned home to see his house ransacked and no sign of his guest."

"Yes..."

"And the most interesting thing is that at each incident, witnesses placed an individual matching the description of the other's NetOp at the scene prior to their disappearance."

"What are you getting at?" Slashman. exe narrowed his eyes.

"Isssn't it obviousss?" Snakeman. exe hissed. "Nebula isss playing you both for foolsss..."

"Is that so...?" Tenguman. exe's eyes narrowed dangerously, but it was clear the target of his ire was elsewhere. "Then they shall soon learn the price of their folly..."

"There it is!" Gyroman. exe exclaimed as he flew towards a sinister purple glow fueling the first line of barriers. "Readying GyroBombs for liberation! Dropping in 3... 2..."

"Screee!" a large TinHawk guardian virus dove down from above, talons outstretched.

"Ack! Mayday! Mayday!" the helicopter-form navi yelped as he initiated evasive maneuvers and tried to angle for a return shot while Shadowman. exe dashed forwards below.

"Open the way, Muramasa," the navi shinobi gripped his sword as he approached the target and in a single motion, drew the blade and sliced through the barrier's power source. Along with a few small viruses that had popped up to defend it.

"The barrier is down!" Colonel. exe's voice sounded in the distance as the dark thunderhead rumbled as if in anticipation. "Press forward!"

"Oh I see how it is!" Gyroman. exe huffed as the TinHawk dissipated due to the souped-up SuperVulcan Lan had sent. "You keep up appearances while leading me into an ambush, eh? Plan to have your buddies take us out one by one?"

"Imbecile," the accused navi snorted. "You seemed intent on providing the distraction and I merely let you do so."

"Like I'd believe that! I'm going to bring the rest of these barriers down and no half-baked ambush is going to stop me! Keep up if you

can!"

"DarkHole ahead!" Protoman. exe noted as the two teams rushed forwards.

"Leave it to us!" Roll. exe replied as she moved nearer to Gutsman. exe. "Ready Gutsman?"

"One fastball special, coming up!" the larger navi grinned and reared back one of his oversized hands in a pitcher's stance right as Roll. exe jumped to land in a crouch on the open palm. "GUTSSHOOT!"

Roll. exe was thrown forward wreathed in a corona of light to impact the DarkHole directly, deleting its guardian virus before it could even finish emerging to face her.

"Superb shot!" Knightman. exe complimented.

"Now it's our turn!" Magnetman. exe came up alongside the massive knight navi and extended his magnetic powers while Knightman. exe extended his chained mace right back. Both then hovered and crackled with electromagnetism, along with the chain stretched between them.

"MAGNET CHAIN!" they bellowed together and rushed through a patch of DarkPanels, destroying the viruses within and dissipating the murky miasma.

"Not bad..." the voice of the darkloid controlling the area rumbled with the dark thunderhead above. "But you're still too weak to defeat the likes of me!"

"Is it just me," Hub examined the thunderhead above, "or does anyone else feel like singing 'NetFrica' just to mess with this guy...?" (41)

"I hear the drums echoing tonight..." Protoman. exe sang so quietly it was practically a hum.

A few more hums that sounded like they could have been following lines were heard from Colonel. exe.

"The moonlit wings reflect the stars that guide me towards salvation..." Roll. exe picked up with a smile.

"I stopped an old man along tha way," Gutsman. exe joined in with his deep rumbling bass as he smashed a few viruses trying to ambush the group.

"Hoping to find some old forgotten words or ancient melodies," Knightman. exe and Magnetman. exe barely got out as they chuckled at the audacity of singing at a time like this. *"He turned to me as if to say, 'Hurry boy, it's waiting there for you'."*

"Stop that at once!" Cloudman. exe demanded angrily. "I *despise* that song!"

"It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from you," Lan's voice joined in over the connection, followed by Hub, just now getting over his amazement at the scene. *"There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do."*

"We bless the rains down in NetFrica..."

"That reminds the great Apollo... What *are* the Mighty Morphing Net Rangers up to?"

"Jammer!" Paulie cried in alarm as his navi was blown backwards from the blast. Four other navis groaned from prone positions deep inside the WaterGodComp as their single opponent laughed.

"Hehehehehe..." the darkly tainted GuardNavi; with limbs of dark gray, a body of navy blue, hands and feet of deepest purple, and a large antenna tipped with purple protruding from his dark gray head; chuckled as he stepped forward through the blast smoke and looked straight at his objective. A yellow figure sitting cross-legged behind a giant metal ovoid facemask with ornamental red lines on the cheeks and forehead, a blue circle in the center of the forehead with a blue wavy line like a river running down the middle of it, straight ridges above rectangular eyes that gave the appearance of a furrowed brow, a massive triangular nose, a rectangular-lipped mouth at the bottom, and what looked like blue and red hoses arranges like dreadlocks sprouting from behind. (42) The digital avatar of the WaterGod's control system. "And to think, when that idiotic tree navi deleted me, I thought it was all for nothing..."

"Ponta?" the worried voice of the ghost girl Yuko cried out pleadingly. "Ponta?! Say something!"

"Hold on Honami!" Koetsu frantically scrolled through options on his PET. There just had to be something here he could use...

"My time has finally come! Today the world will know my name as I corrupt the so-called 'Water God' and infuse the taint of DarkPower at the earliest access point of NetFrica's greatest river! Seeding the power of Darkness into the life-giving waters of half the continent!"

"But... that would..." Flave's eyes widened in horror at the implications.

"Damn you, you sick bastard...!" Testu growled from outside the comp as he and the other NetOps tried to revive their fallen navis in time to stop the agent of Nebula.

"And with my victory over the famous Net Rangers themselves," the modified GuardNavi turned to take in the five badly damaged navis trying to pick themselves up as he gloated, "I shall become famous! Known and feared the entire net over! The whole world shall know the name of BOMBERMAN! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Hooohoohoohoohoo..." another voice joined in the laughter.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Hoohoohoohoohoo...!"

"HAHAHAHA–Huh?" the self-proclaimed Bomberman. exe turned to look in the direction of the other laugh. All he saw was the large, almost navi-like, figure of the WaterGodComp's control system.

"Hoohoohoo...!" the system shook in time with the laughter. "Such a bold action to take, young one..."

"What in...?" the mad bomber stared at the laughing system as it moved.

"Hoohoohoo...! Tainting the waters of the whole river?" the figure slowly stood, stretching its thin limbs to lift the huge facemask off the ground, and the giant slab still pulled the figure's torso forwards in a bend until the bottom of the mask was level with the figure's knees. "I'm afraid I can't allow that... hoohoohoo...!"

The figure stepped forwards in a tottering sway, the space behind him rippling and leaving behind a utilitarian interface vaguely resembling a Mr. Prog.

"Who the hell are you?!" Bomberman. exe growled as he took a step back, taking a ready stance. "No system can just get up like that!"

"Hoohoohoo...!" the figure chortled in amusement. "You might say that I am the Water God this village has revered for ages. You might say that I am merely a water management program a bit too well made for its task. Hoohoohoo...! Such a conundrum! I suppose you may call me... Waterman... That is the naming system you kids use these days, right?" (43)

"Well, then, 'Waterman'," the invader sneered. "Prepare for deletion! ElectroBomb!"

The mad bomber navi threw a sparking explosive at the navi called Waterman. exe, who began doing a panicked dance as he watched the deadly explosive fly towards him.

"Oh me! Oh my! Oh–"

Zapboom!

"NO!" Paulie and a struggling Jammer cried out in horror as the explosive scored a direct hit.

"Oh right! Hoohoohoo...!" the voice of Waterman. exe laughed as the electric field dissipated to show he was unharmed, and dancing mockingly. "My mask makes for quite the shield! Hoohoohoohoohoo...!"

"Grr... Why you...!" Bomberman. exe fumed and readied more explosives. "CrossBomb!"

Baboom!

"Hoohoohoo...!"

"FlareBomb!"

Fwabwoosh!

"Not a chance, hoohoo...!"

"SpiceBomb!"

SnapCracklePop!

"A little to the left, sonnyboy! I've got an itch!"

"AquaBomb!"

"Hmm?" Waterman. exe perked up at the last and instead of letting it impact his mask, reached out and caught in in midair.

"Wha...?" Bomberman. exe stared in shock as his new opponent calmly held the device up to one of the mask's eyes.

"Hoo-hoo-hoo...!" Waterman. exe laughed. "Such an interesting device! Looks tasty, hoohoo...!"

And with that, the rectangular mouth on the mask dropped open for Waterman. exe to toss the aqua bomb into. The moment it closed, there was the sound of a muffled explosion and the river-management-system-turned-navi gained a bright blue glow.

"What are you...?"

"Hoohoohoo..." Waterman. exe laughed low and threatening. "Whether you think I am a god or a program makes little difference... Either way, I am a mighty river spirit, sonny... And you're trying to poison my waters... Such a transgression must be met with all the fury of the river itself..."

The mouth of the mask opened once more and the growing sound of rushing water could be heard from within it.

"RAGING RAPIDS!"

"Eeeheeheeheeheeheeheeeeeee... Wipeout!" Apollo laughed as he started up a riff on his lyre.

"Objective in sight," Shadowman. exe readied his blade as he dashed forwards. "Ope–"

"GROWL!" a BigBrute burst forth from the dark mire directly in front of the shinobi and let loose a burst of flames, causing Shadowman. exe to halt his charge and leap backwards to avoid the attack.

"Looks like you didn't feed your pet on time!" Gyroman. exe laughed as he flew over the confrontation to the source of the next barrier.

"Target acquired! Bomb Liberation!"

Shadowman. exe muttered several dark insults under his breath as he slashed the guardian virus with the Z-Saber Lan sent him while the imbecilic thrill-seeker continued to verbally pat himself on the back.

Lan sweatdropped at the intense rivalry developing between Gyroman. exe and Shadowman. exe.

"Man, if they keep that up..."

"Yeah," Hub replied from where he was with the main group, pressing forwards through the dark mire and sealing the DarkHoles, "it won't end well. I'll see if I can talk some sense into them..."

"Focus!" Colonel. exe's voice chastised. "We must seal these portals of darkness and remove the protections around the darkloid commander!"

With the final barrier down, the objective was plain to see. After all, it was surrounded by a near-constant barrage of sinister purple lightning bolts, in the middle of which sat Cloudman. exe.

"Okay, let's seal these last DarkHoles!" Protoman. exe urged the group.

"Excellent!" Gyroman. exe's voice interrupted as he flew by. "I'll go on ahead and take this Cloudman chump out the moment his protection comes down!"

"Gyroman, get back–!" Hub called after the helicopter navi.

"Fool!" Shadowman. exe dashed past at that moment. "You lack the finesse to slay one such as Cloudman. *I* shall complete the mission objective!"

"Oh for the love of–!"

"GROWL!"

"SCREEE!"

"Defeat the guardian viruses before they clear the DarkHoles!"

"Let's make things interesting, shall we?" Cloudman. exe's voice rumbled with the thunderhead above. "CrossSpark!"

Two bolts of sinister purple lightning lanced down from above, and two screams echoed across the tainted cyberscape.

"Roll! Gutsman!" Lan cried out in alarm.

"Nngh...!"

"W-we... can't m-move...!"

"Okay, that's it! Time to kick it up a notch! Triple Wideshot! Battlechips in! Download!"

Gyroman. exe grinned to himself as the barrier of lightning bolts slowed and vanished with the sealing of the final DarkHoles. Now he could fight the ruler of this area and see just how strong these 'darkloids' really were...

"Here I go! GyroBomb!" he yelled as he dropped bombs on the area below, deleting viruses and clearing away the dark mire leading to the target.

"Watch it, you fool!" Shadowman. exe snarled angrily as he dashed along below, narrowly avoiding the airstrike himself.

"What? Can't dodge a few little bombs?" Gyroman chuckled as he transformed and faced the thundercloud-bottomed navi Cloudman.

exe.

"Just stay out of my way..." Shadowman. exe growled as he did the same.

"How amusing..." the darkloid said with a stoic frown, calmly raising his arms and forming multiple thunderclouds before him that glowed and shot electric balls at both his adversaries.

"Hah!" Gyroman. exe smirked as he danced around the shots and closed in on his opponent. "This is all you've got?"

"Clear the storm, Muramasa," Shadowman. exe intoned as he too dashed through the electric bolts and slashed through the clouds firing them.

"Hey!" the helicopter navi yelped. "You almost cut me!"

"I said to stay out of my way," Shadowman. exe scoffed.

"Yeah, right! I knew you were waiting for a chance to backstab me all along!"

"If you wish a fight, I am willing to oblige you," the ninja sneered and readied his blade.

"By all means, don't mind me," Cloudman. exe's voice penetrated their confrontation. They turned to look, but all they could see was a sea of the darkloid's clouds, along with one twice the size of Knightman. exe that was already upon them.

"Gaaaahhh...!"

"Nnnngh...!"

"Hahaha!" Cloudman. exe's disembodied voice laughed as both navis were electrified by the thundercloud.

"T-tornado Arm!" Gyroman. exe gasped out as he formed a wind to blow away the clouds, but as he did a barrage of giant shuriken were thrown by Shadowman. exe and the attacks intercepted each other and were sent off-target. "D-damn you..."

"S-stop interfering..." the ninja grunted back.

"It ends now!" Cloudman. exe popped out of one of his clouds. "CrossSpark!"

A bolt of purple lightning lanced down directly in between both navis and exploded into a long-lasting cross-shaped burst of electrical energy on impact.

"GAH!"

"NGH!"

"LeaderRaid!"

A cavalry charge sounded in Hephaestus's office as the forge god wondered where the heck Apollo had been keeping the bugle horn.

"Knightman!" Hub called as Colonel. exe and Protoman. exe engaged Cloudman. exe. "Stand guard over these two!"

"I shall guard them with my life!" the armored navi took his position, similar to how Magnetman. exe was even now protecting the recovering Roll. exe and Gutsman. exe.

"Good, now WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU TWO?!" Hub demanded of the injured mercenaries, looking like he was seriously considering slapping them both upside their heads like he'd seen on some cop drama Dex had talked everyone into watching.

"I'm j-just making sure t-this traitor..." Gyroman. exe grit his teeth as sparks raced over his form.

"Hmp-ph... Y-you are only concern-ned with s-showboating..." Shadowman. exe did the same.

"Oh for the love of... I cannot believe you two!" Hub yelled. "I get rivalry, really, but trying to have it out right in front of someone who *wants to kill all of us* ?! What did you *think* was going to happen?!"

"G-gotta–"

" *What?* " Hub interrupted sharply. "Prove yourself? Show everyone you can take out people like Nebula all on your own?"

"As I th-thought... He lacks–"

"Discipline?" Hub cut in mercilessly. "And just where was yours a few seconds ago, hmm?"

"H-he's a–"

"No, both of you shut it right now. Gyroman, I get that you're thrilled to be going up against strong opponents. I get that you see this as some big adventure. I do too. As bad as things are, I *also* feel the thrill of fighting at the highest level possible. Of being challenged by strong opponents. Shadowman, I know what it's like to have the darkness whisper at you. To be tempted to take the easy way out, but have the discipline to see things through no matter how hard it is. But–"

Bolts of purple lightning rained down from the battle a short distance away and a cry of pain was heard from one of their allies.

"Look," Hub decided to get straight to the point. "I don't care whether you two see this as the adventure of a lifetime or just another mission to complete, but what I need you both to understand is that *no one* can do this alone. *You* can't. *I* can't. *They* can't. So either you

put whatever problems you have aside until later or you stay out of everyone else's way."

The two mercenary navis traded a quick look with each other.

"I'll fog you up! DarkCloud!"

"Gah!"

Hub swore and readied himself to enter the fray.

"Truce?" Shadowman. exe offered.

"Truce nothing," Gyroman. exe grinned and offered his hand to the other navi. "I have an *idea* ..."

Shadowman. exe snorted in amusement and took the hand.

"Cavalry's coming!" a shout came from the distance as a recovered Roll. exe and Gutsman. exe charged in along with Magnetman. exe.

"Get ready!" Magnetman. exe floated up alongside Roll. exe as they closed in. "MAGNET FLASH!"

Cloudman. exe reared back from the flash of light the two navis produced as Gutsman. exe jumped into the air for a descending hammer blow from his fists. As this happened, Hub watched the former rivals fly up into the air, Shadowman. exe clinging to the rails of Gyroman. exe's helicopter form.

Shaking his head, Hub got ready to enter the fray himself as he felt the resonance of souls.

And promptly tripped over his own feet as he felt it a second time.

"Rgh..." Cloudman. exe growled as he recovered from Gutsman. exe's hammer blow. "Feel the wrath of my divine punishment!"

"No, you feel the wrath of ours!" Gyroman. exe and Shadowman. exe announced together as they both entered freefall straight for the darkloid. The former readying his Tornado Arm blasters while the latter manifested several giant shuriken.

"CROSSSP–"

"KAMIKAZE!"

Apollo whistled lowly at the sight. "Shuriken-laced whirlwind? *Nice* . The great Apollo is duly impressed and... Are you taking notes, brother?"

"I think it's been awhile since I gave 'dear old dad' a present..." the forge god grinned maliciously.

"Do let the predictive Apollo know when you plan to gift it so he can set up the cameras beforehand."

"Agh! Defeated...? It... cannot be...! But... hehehe... I don't think you'll... be making it out... alive...! Hahahahaha...!"

With that, the form of Cloudman. exe began to glow brightly with the sinister purple color of DarkPower.

"Magnet Barrier!"

"IronBody!"

"Sanctuary! Battlechip in, download!"

The electrical detonation formed like a massive lightning bolt and punched a hole in the thunderhead above, but otherwise was mostly absorbed by the hastily raised defenses.

Lan wiped sweat from his forehead as the darkness in the area of Scilab's net began dissipating rapidly with the removal of the darkloid maintaining it.

"Whew... commanding that many navis is tiring... And it feels like I'm forgetting something..."

Hub was in a mild state of shock as the dark miasma saturating the area dissipated. The events of Nebula's occupation of the net may have been proceeding in a strange mish-mash of both sets of conflicting memories with the inevitable results of his and Lan's changes mixed in; that Dex had joined Baryl and Colonel's team back on Oran and Mayl had joined Chaud and Protoman's was proof enough of that; but that had been not entirely unexpected.

The meeting with Dark Miyabi and Shadowman. exe at the park had been half-expected. That it was followed by Charlie and Gyroman. exe attacking Tesla and leading them on the wild goose chase from Oran to Scilab had been odd. The resulting fight between Shadowman. exe and Gyroman. exe that ended in the start of a joint mission to liberate Scilab had been surreal.

Yet somehow, between the more heavily fortified darkloid position in Scilab than either he or Lan recalled and the heated rivalry between the two mercenary navis, Hub had achieved a soul resonance with both Shadowman. exe *and* Gyroman. exe. That... had never happened before. The soul resonance had only ever happened between himself and one other navi at a time, both in current events and in his memories of other timelines, and he was lost in thought over the implications behind this new development.

So lost that he almost didn't hear Lan's warning.

"Hub! It's a trap!" Lan shouted just as the cloud of DarkPower appeared and went for him.

Had he really been paying attention, he could have dodged it. However, the moment it took him and the others to adjust to the sudden development was a moment too long. The dark cloud engulfed him and he heard Lan shouting as he lost consciousness.

"Well, damn..." Apollo swore as the success chances dropped by a whopping 50%.

Mayl sighted down the arrow at the hay targets in the distance and tried to clear her mind of anything except the target and Roll. exe. In cyberspace, Roll. exe was doing the same thing on the cyberspace archery range, only focusing on her connection to Mayl. When they were ready and in perfect sync, they would both fire their arrows.

Or at least that was the idea. As Mayl went to release hers, the connection with her navi twinged, throwing her aim off and sending the arrow wide. It had been like this since...

Since Megaman. exe had been taken by Nebula.

Roll. exe was worried about what was happening to him, and Mayl was worried about the effect it was having on Lan. The worry of each fed on the worry of the other when they synched up in a recursive feedback loop that inevitably destroyed any concentration they gained.

"I see you're still having trouble," Andou observed as she walked up, prompting Mayl to lower her bow and turn towards the young miko.

"I'm sorry, it's just..."

"I understand," Andou waved her off. "The pain of losing a friend is very powerful indeed. There is no shame in what you feel. But if you wish to aid your friend, you will need to focus past your pain. To turn what you feel into an aid for your focus rather than a hindrance."

"I know, but..."

"It is difficult," the voice of Stargirl. exe agreed. "When Andou restored me from the remaining data of Starman, I felt anger at the one who defeated my previous incarnation even though I only barely knew who he was and she felt anger at the ones who had deleted her former navi. It took us both time to move past that anger and work as one."

"But the both of you already work as one very well," Andou continued. "You simply must discover how to handle what you both feel and focus past it. It will be difficult, but I have faith in you both."

"Thanks..." Mayl smiled.

"That said, I was wondering if you would be willing to watch the shrine for a while?" Andou asked. "My cousin and her friends have found a way to infiltrate her island's network and–"

"Woooo!" the boisterous cheer from a somewhat heavyset man with a drill-shaped pompadour charged towards them.

"Hello Moliarty," Mayl turned and bowed in greeting.

"Didja hear?" the man wasted no time. "Mr. Press found a way into Lilly's home network! Scissor Island's gonna be liberated in no time! We're all going to charge in and give the bastards what-for! You coming?"

"Roll and I couldn't reliably hit the broad side of a barn right now," Mayl reluctantly admitted. "But I'm sure you all will do just fine. After all, you have Andou and Stargirl on your side!"

"Damn straight we do!"

"Ah, pardon me, ladies. I need to run a quick errand. I'll be back shortly. Hephaestus knows how to get ahold of me if there's an

emergency. Good day to you."

Brynhildr, Eir, and Herfjötur were a bit worried. When Apollo had exited the inner office, they'd been expecting another round of bad pickup lines, self-inflating boasts, and not-really-veiled-at-all suggestions of possible intimate activity.

They hadn't been expecting the Olympian layabout to give the three of them a respectful nod and march out into the hall with business-like calm and demeanor.

"Was that really Apollo?" Herfjötur finally gave voice to what they were all thinking. "Where did the infamous Olympian beach bum go?"

"I have no idea, but I doubt it bodes well for the current activation attempt," Brynhildr replied to an agreeing nod from Eir.

"Focus!" Kaneda barked at his hefty student. "Anger can be a potent tool, but only when tightly controlled! You must rule your anger, and not let it rule you!"

"Easy for you to say..." Dex growled as he glared at the sandbag before him like it was personally responsible for everything that had gone wrong. "You didn't watch one of your best friends get swallowed up like..."

"The weakness of others is no excuse for your own failings! Your friend was unequal to the task before him and so you must–"

What Dex 'must' was drowned out in a bellow of rage as he turned and charged the older man in fury. His first punch was contemptuously caught in the older man's hand, as was the other one Dex tried to power through in his berserk fury. But Dex didn't stop even with both hands captured and launched himself in a rising headbutt that caught the man by surprise in the nose.

Dex's moment of triumph was short lived, as Mr. Kaneda responded almost instantly with a knee to Dex's stomach followed by a vicious series of blows that left the large boy groaning on the mat.

"And that is why you are yet unworthy," Mr. Kaneda snorted. "Weak operators make for weak navis and weakness is not tolerated by those who follow the way of the Fist."

"Why you..." Gutsman. exe's voice growled from Dex's PET. "Why don't you put yer money where yer mouth is in a netbattle! We'll pulverize ya, legendary Fist navi or no!"

"The weakest dogs still bark the loudest, it seems," the voice of Mr. Kaneda's legendary fighting navi snorted from the older man's PET.

"Yes," the man crossed his arms pointedly. "Which is why we've arranged for an interim trainer who may be more your speed. When she is finished with you, perhaps you will be ready to begin in earnest."

"Oh, stuff it 'uncle'," a woman's voice sneered from the doorway, prompting a recovering Dex to turn and look. "I only came because no one deserves having to put up with the self-righteous BS you call 'training'. There's a reason my sister and your son stopped speaking to you."

"T-Tamako?" Dex groaned out in pain and confusion as he looked at the woman, recognizing her as the aunt of Lan's friend Mamoru.

"Had my son and his wife done the sensible thing and–"

"I said *stuff it* , old man," Tamako growled while fingering her bladed hair clip threateningly. "I may not be able to beat you in a fair fight, but if you finish that sentence, I *promise* I will leave you less of a man..."

"Hmph..." Mr. Kaneda snorted disdainfully and turned away. "As you wish. The boy is your problem now."

With that, Mr. Kaneda left the room and pointedly shut the door behind him.

"W-what was that all...?" Dex grunted out as he tried to stand past his aching everything.

"Don't you worry about that now," Tamako moved to help Dex stand. "Just focus on healing, and then I'll be teaching you the way of the Fist in place of the idiot old man. Who knows? Maybe you'll be the one to finally put the stubborn old fart in his place."

Hephaestus worried as he examined the activation attempt for the umpteenth time, looking for any possible way to alleviate the current circumstances. DarkSouls were problematic things to begin with, which meant there was every possibility that one that sprouted within a looper could become a serious problem down the line.

Fortunately, there was a method of dealing with the issue preemptively called the Grima Patch. The particular patch prevented any manner of potentially dangerous entities from hitching a ride on a looper's code and becoming a looper themselves, provided the entity was a natural, and thus recognized, part of the Loop's code. What made the Grima Patch unique among such counter measures was that it could even lock out potentially dangerous entities from looping that were technically soul-bound to the looper in question, such as DarkSouls. The end result was that DarkSouls were unable to Loop at all, instead being limited to becoming Loop Aware when they manifested within an Awake looper. As a bonus, visiting loopers would be highly unlikely to keep their DarkSoul after a fused Loop.

Unfortunately, like most every bit of coding, there was a loophole. One that wasn't even worth mentioning most of the time, but in the current situation was like the fifty-ton pink elephant in the room. That loophole being that if Hub (or Lan for that matter) ended the activation attempt with a DarkSoul in control of their being, Yggdrasil would interpret that as their normal state and the DarkSoul would become the looping Hub (or Lan).

Hephaestus would sooner terminate the attempt himself than let that happen. Either to the Loops or to the Hikari twins.

Fortunately, the activation was far from over, and there was a good chance that Hub would recover. It would be painful and hard, given that the DarkSoul naturally possessed all the knowledge that Hub himself did. Including foreknowledge.

But that wasn't even the worst of it.

"How very interesting..." Dr. Regal pondered what his newest Darkloid had told him. How very interesting *indeed* ...

"It's all true, Doctor," Dark Megaman grinned widely. "This body heard the whole thing from a visitor from another universe in fact. Time is repeating itself across the entire multiverse, and this boy is one of the ones cherry-picked to remember these 'Loops'. If you could only see the vast store of information he has on the years to come..."

"I suppose it is fortunate then that I have you to enlighten me," Dr. Regal smiled darkly. "Now, tell me again about the events you saw in Megaman's memories. And do please spare no detail this time..."

Lan shot up in bed, panting, wondering if what he'd just seen had been some sort of vision or just a nightmare. It had been Hub... strapped to a table...

"Just a dream..." he told himself. He wasn't entirely sure if he believed it. It felt like... It felt like a part of his soul had been ripped out when Hub was abducted... Like there was no point in continuing...

"Lan's up in his room," Mrs. Hikari told her visitor. "He's been depressed for a few days, doesn't say much, doesn't get on the net

at all, barely eats... I'm really worried about him."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Hikari," the diminutive girl smiled. "We'll have him back on his feet in no time."

He sat and listened in on the two as they discussed the current situation. He'd been observing the developing situation for a while now since Dr. Hikari had been abducted, wondering what his role in the current drama was to be.

"The boy needs a stern reminder of what's at stake," the older man stated. "His skills are too valuable to waste feeling sorry for himself."

"What he needs is a target," the younger figure, a boy in name only, shook his head. "Something to unleash his anger on instead of turning it inwards at himself."

"He needs some sense knocked into him," the man rebutted. "This is no time to be soft."

"He needs his drive back," the other argued. "And there's no one better to do it than us."

"I disagree. He needs discipline and a replacement for his lost navi." (44)

"On that last part, we can agree. Though he has far more experience with my navi than yours."

"He is nothing if not a fast learner."

Hmm... Perhaps he'd found his role after all.

"Oh, hey Yai... What's up?" Lan's morose tone drifted down the stairs to where Mrs. Hikari was listening.

"What's up?! What's up?! I'll tell you what's up! Glide's informed me that you aren't answering your messages and that Megaman seems to be missing! Dex and Mayl both confirmed it even if they won't tell me what the hell happened! And now I learn that you're just moping around feeling sorry for yourself?!"

"Look, Yai, you wouldn't understand... I–"

"I 'wouldn't understand', huh? Here! Let me show you my 'not understanding'!"

"Hey, wait! What are–"

A sound followed that Mrs. Hikari had typically only heard when her son rolled out of bed on accident.

"Geez! Yai, what was–"

"I'll tell you what I understand, Lan! I understand that if Megaman saw you sitting around feeling sorry for yourself like this, then he'd tell you to get up off your sorry butt and do something about it! So that's what you're going to do if I have to kick you into gear myself!"

"What–Ow! Hey! Cut it–Ow! Those hurt you–Ow! Stop kicking me in the shins alrea–OW!"

"I must say, I am surprised you came here of your own volition," Baryl noted as he took in Lan's presence in the command center. "We were about to send you a message summoning you."

"Let's just say I got a few swift kicks," Lan winced, resisting the urge to rub his sore shins.

"I see..." Baryl noted.

"Lan," Chaud began, "you are an invaluable asset to our teams and with Megaman's capture, you need a navi to operate. After much

debate," Chaud shot Baryl a stern glare that the other team commander didn't acknowledge, "we've decided that the navi you will be operating will be–"

"Me," a voice cut in from the giant screen behind both team leaders. Lan looked up to see a face he'd not encountered for a while.

"Zero?" he blurted incredulously. (45)

"What are you doing here?" Chaud turned to glare at the viral navi hotly.

"I have just as much a stake in the return of Dr. Hikari as anyone," Zero. exe returned calmly. "After all, he is my registered NetOp."

"You're my dad's NetNavi?" Lan blinked in total astonishment. This he hadn't seen coming. Not by a long shot.

"He was kind enough to make the offer after we parted ways," Zero. exe informed him, ignoring the joint dirty looks from both Chaud and Baryl. "Though I see he has successfully ignored my advice to tell you about the arrangement."

"Dad's generally busy," Lan defended while rubbing his head sheepishly.

"I know exactly how busy he is," Zero. exe retorted. "I'm the one who helps with his experiments after all, along with managing his schedule. But you haven't said whether you will accept me as your navi in place of Megaman for the time being."

"Absolutely not," Baryl insisted, folding his arms resolutely.

"Agreed," Chaud mirrored the stance.

"Thanks Zero," Lan wiped a tear out of his eye as he prepared his PET. "I accept."

"Lan!" Chaud whipped around. "You can't be serious!"

"He's a virus!" Baryl agreed. "A possible agent of Nebula!"

"He's a friend and I trust him," Lan said as his PET chimed the completion of Zero. exe's data transfer. "And besides, he's the one navi I *know* my brother won't be prepared for."

"Fools!" the darkloid holding Scissor island boasted. "You cannot best the one who flies free under the dark sky!"

"That's... nngh... what you think..." Windman. exe grunted as he strained to try and control the dark tempest corrupting the temple's network beyond recognition. But try as he might, the winds did not heed his divine command.

"As if your pathetic winds are a match for those of darkness!" the darkloid's laugh was carried by the howling winds rather than being drowned out by them. "Mewling little pretend god! You and your allies have no power here! Return from whence you came!"

"I'm... losing... my..." Stargirl. exe strained to hold on to Groundman. exe to avoid being blown away by the dark tempest.

"No you're *not* ," Dustman. exe and Groundman. exe insisted together, continuing to use their larger and heavier navi bodies to guard their three teammates against the worst of the storm.

Three, you wonder? Well, the last was a recent addition. Picked up just outside the entrance to the temple's network worrying about the disappearance of his NetOp and the man's son. The navi without whom, they might not have even gotten inside. A navi by the name of Hatman. exe.

"Yes! Stand together in false bonds of friendship!" the darkloid laughed. "Make yourselves all the bigger a target for me! Lark Drive!"

The avian-themed darkloid dived suddenly out of the tempest winds, scything straight for the team known to themselves as the Wind

Followers, intending to cut them down all in one swoop.

"Hat Trick!" Hatman. exe called out, and the group of navis was suddenly replaced by a line of top hats. The darkloid tore through two of them with ease even as the others were blown away to reveal... nothing.

"A pretty trick!" the now-angry darkloid screeched as he returned to the concealing winds. "But they will not save you from me forever! None can outrun Larkman for long!"

"How does End Area look Zero?" Lan asked. Chaud and Baryl, along with their navis, had argued about the arrangement for a good long while, but they'd accepted it in the end. Baryl more reluctantly than Chaud. Lan suspected his own stubbornness had played a role in that, along with the fact that there were still missions that needed to be carried out no matter what anyone's personal feelings on the matter were.

He'd had to resist the urge to ask Zero. exe to take a picture of Baryl though. While Chaud had just settled into his 'I hope you know what you're doing' look, Baryl's face looked like he'd been sucking on a lemon for the entire mission briefing.

"Like someone's been overclocking it way past intended parameters," Zero. exe reported as he looked upon the angrily red cyberscape. From the floor, to the walls, to the wallpaper background, to the *air itself* . And this wasn't even Nebula's stronghold area.

Lan watched on as Zero. exe walked through the eerily empty cyberscape, towards where they could both feel the source of DarkPower radiating. Until suddenly Zero. exe stopped cold and ignited his Z-Saber. Lan's breath hitched, knowing what was coming.

"Show yourself," the former virus demanded.

"Well, well," a heart-breakingly familiar voice sounded as the cyberscape rippled and a dark portal formed from nothing to produce exactly who Lan was expecting, and exactly who he'd been hoping it wouldn't be. Dark Megaman, in all his sinister glory. "I must say, this *is* a surprise. Zero."

"Megaman," Zero. exe glared at the figure, neither moving to attack nor stand down in the slightest.

"I am Dark Megaman," the twisted parody of Lan's brother grinned madly, "but Lan already knew that didn't he? Master Regal has placed me in charge of this area in preparation for your coming, over the... rather vocal protests of its former commander. But I must say... I was expecting Protoman... Or even Colonel! What an unexpected twist of events *this* is! I wonder though... Is dear old Zero prepared to do what's necessary?"

"Try me and find out," the viral navi glared stoically.

"Hehehe..." Dark Megaman grinned. "So ready to cut down the life of the one who saved you?"

"Ready to repay a debt in kind," Zero. exe replied without hesitation.

"Now, now... You both know you can't be soft when you're up against Nebula! Hahahaha–hrrgh!"

Dark Megaman's body shuddered violently and he clutched his chest.

"Z...Zero..." Hub's voice struggled from within, "hurry... and..."

"Hyaah!" Dark Megaman's body pulsed with DarkPower and he regained control. "Hehehe... right on schedule even..."

"What?" Zero. exe blinked in confusion.

"That's right, Lan... No easy way out for you two this time... I've got dear old Hub right where we want him!"

Three Nebula HeelNavis appeared between the two right then.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got preparations to make and plans to adjust. Have fun you two!" Dark Megaman taunted before vanishing the same way he'd appeared.

"Kehehehe..." one of the HeelNavis chuckled. "Leave it to us. This pathetic navi don't stand a chance..."

"You will need far more than you've brought to stand a chance," Zero. exe declared.

"What makes you think there isn't a lot more of us?" the Nebula navis chuckled as more appeared in Zero. exe's way. Over a dozen in fact.

"A light warm-up," Zero. exe stated confidently. "You would need hundreds to even give me pause."

"Oh?" the Nebula navis didn't seem intimidated. "That so? Well..."

More Nebula navis appeared along the path to Nebula's holdings, all generic navis of varying types, all individually weak, but all steeped in DarkPower and all completely unafraid of how many might fall to their foe's blade.

"...hundreds we got." (46)

"Lan, I believe a tactical reassessment is in order," Zero. exe advised.

"Yeah, I think you're right..." Lan agreed with a gulp. That was a *lot* more navis than he recalled.

"Dust Bre–ARGH!" Dustman. exe screamed as he was struck, before falling over, body sparking.

"Hahahahaha!" Larkman. exe's laugh echoed along the tempest winds. "One down! Soon there will be nowhere left for you to run!"

"No," Groundman. exe growled, bracing his treads against the dark storm as he took aim at the guardian beast before him, "soon there will be nowhere for *you* to run! Rock! Crush!"

"Lark Cutter!"

The bird-shaped projectile carved through Groundman. exe, but the drill-themed navi didn't even pause as his treads revved ever faster and his drills whined at higher and higher pitches as they spun.

"BREAKER!"

The guardian virus perished with a great cry as the last of the area's Dark Holes was sealed with its demise and the dark tempest they fueled slowly became still dead air.

"Lan..." Zero. exe's voice spoke up moments after Lan had jacked him out. "Would you care to explain why Dark Megaman said 'right on schedule' when Megaman tried to break through his control?"

"It's... complicated..." Lan hedged.

"I see... Would this manner of complicated be why he was expecting Protoman or Colonel in my place? An expectation that would only have made sense if one was privvy to the debate between Chaud and Baryl earlier?"

Lan remained silent as Zero. exe waited patiently for an explanation, until–

Ring-ring-ring!

"Looks like a request from Chaud asking us to report in," Zero. exe sighed. "I suppose this will have to wait."

"No..." Lan replied. "Ask him to meet us somewhere. I... I think he needs to know this too..."

"I... I've decided... to give you my blood!"

Django just looked at the turned back and carefully exposed neck of his girlfriend and sighed.

"No, Lita..."

"Please?"

"Lita, I'm not going to bite you."

"Not even a teeny little nip?"

" *No* , Lita..." Django facepalmed.

"Well, poo..." Lita pouted, folding her arms. "How am I supposed to have an excuse for turning into a sexy werewolf girl and joining you on your immortal hunts this Loop, then?" (47)

"Why not use the 'mysterious Earth Maiden powers' excuse like you usually do?" Django folded his arms right back.

"Because that's not nearly as fun as you biting me," Lita insisted with a blush.

Django resisted the urge to pinch his nose. This wasn't the first time they'd had this argument after all. On the one hand, the fact that Lita didn't mind Django's half-vampire nature that he'd picked up many times over was heartwarming. On the other, she seemed to enjoy it a little too much at times.

"Lita..." Django trailed off, really not sure what he wanted to say to her.

"Well, I suppose I could always go the plant mistress route if you prefer..." Lita trailed off before doing a little twirl of magic, resulting in...

"GA–" Django slapped his hands over both his nose and eyes while trying to barricade any possible view of his girlfriend from the door with his body. "Put some clothes on!" he hissed in as loud a whisper as he dared.

"I'll have you know this is appropriate for a girl with plant powers and is perfectly modest!" Lita huffed.

"Only in the most liberal of societies *on a technicality* !" Django hissed back, resisting the urge to peek through his fingers.

"He's right," a new voice added. "The vines and leaves look is less 'battle maiden' and more 'illicit meeting in a secluded summer glen'. Though I do admit it's a good look for you. Seriously, Django, you shouldn't be ashamed to see your girlfriend like this, especially when she's doing it just for you."

"..."

"EEEEEEEKK!" Lita screamed and Django leaped between her and the new voice, readying both his Gun Del Sol and his Sol de Vice in case it was...

"Damnit Apollo..." Django glared at the smirking face of his Admin, "do you know how to *knock* ?!"

"Yes, but this was more amusing," Apollo replied in a matter-of-fact way that set alarms blaring in Django's head. The solar boy glanced from the Admin to his girlfriend who was hiding behind him and doing her best to cover up with her arms, hands, and the vines that pretended at being a garment. A wave of Apollo's arm and she was suddenly dressed in a fine priestess robe of blues and greens with wisps of white. "I hope that will do as an apology, Lita, but pro tip? In the future if you're going to tease your boyfriend by threatening to

wear something out in public, make sure you're actually willing to wear it out in public."

"What's this about, Apollo?" Django asked. "If *you're* dropping the act, it *has* to be important."

"Right to the point, eh? Well, it's about the new guys you met recently actually."

"Hub and Lan?"

"Got it in one," the sun god nodded. "You see, you have a bit more in common with them than you might think. And Hub's gonna need your guidance when you meet again."

"Well, I'll be sure to help however I can next Loop we cross paths, but–"

"Not next Loop, *this* Loop," Apollo corrected. "And Hub'll be coming *here* this time."

"...I thought you said the other points weren't stable enough?" Django's face hardened as Lita rested a hand on his shoulder.

"I did," Apollo admitted, "but recent events over in their Loop just made the kind of guidance you can offer that much more critical to them getting through their activation in one piece."

Django remained quiet, before performing a gesture with his hand, his fingertips becoming claws, his skin turning a bluish gray, his clothes turning black and dark shades, his canines elongating, his goggles elongating into a beak-like mask, and his crimson scarf flaring like a pair of wings. His Dark Trance form activated by tapping his half-vampire nature. He felt Lita's comforting embrace from behind as he spoke. "This is about the power of darkness, isn't it...?"

"Indeed it is," Apollo admitted. "As we speak, your friend Hub is trapped in its embrace. I foresee him breaking out of it, thanks in no

small part to Lan and their very determined mutual friends, but it's a part of him now. He will need guidance in how to deal with it, how to resist its seductive whispers, and even... how to use it if he's to come out the other side of all of this in one piece."

"What do I–?"

"Whatever you think best," Apollo interrupted. "I don't always foresee details, and in this case I foresee precious few. I don't know exactly how, I just know that your guidance is going to be critical to Hub and Lan getting through their activation intact. Which is why I've arranged for both of the upcoming crossing points to be possible despite any potential problems. Plus... I did a little tweaking for the next one..."

"What did you do?" Django groaned.

"That's a surprise," Apollo winked. "Any more questions?"

"Yes, actually," Lita spoke up. "It's... I've been wondering for a while... but..."

"Yes?"

"Well..." Lita took a deep breath. "I looked up mythology last time we were in the Hub and most of the immortals and other enemies Django faces have names similar to figures from Norse mythology... But..."

"You're Greek," Django nodded.

"Honestly surprised this didn't come up sooner," Apollo shrugged. "Yeah, the Aesir were pretty hot to have you on their ticket, but, well, I had a vision that helping run this place would be a hoot and a half and made sure to beat them to it." Apollo then grinned at the memory. "Man, was Frey mad when I got the job." (48)

"Hmm..." Chaud laced his fingers together as he sat in the currently empty Den Dome, digesting what Lan had told him. "As fantastic as it sounds, it fits with what I've observed about you."

"What?" Lan blinked in astonishment. "Really?"

"Yes," Chaud reiterated. "Leaving aside the fantastic tale about meeting someone from a fictional universe, having your consciousness sent back in time would explain your exceptionally high level of foresight regarding certain events. You have literally done this before."

"Not *exactly* like this," Lan admitted.

"Of course," Chaud acknowledged. "The more you change events, the greater they diverge from what you remember. Nebula and the WWW's plans have likely only remained largely the same because they have been in motion for much longer than your alterations could affect."

"So, you are not going to conclude that Lan is crazy?" Zero. exe asked for clarification from Lan's PET.

"Of course not," Chaud scoffed, waiting for the sigh of relief he knew the other boy would let out before continuing. "Lan's always been crazy."

"Ye–HEY!"

Chaud just smirked as Lan fumed at the dig, allowing himself a few moments enjoyment before he had to be serious again.

"But this also means that it's safe to assume that Dr. Regal and Nebula now know everything about the previous future that you and Megaman knew," Chaud's tone turned grim.

"Future *s* ," Lan corrected him. "Our memories about events have been conflicting lately. One set has you leading a team, the other set

has Baryl, but neither set has both."

"Duly noted," Chaud accepted the correction. "It still means that we should be prepared to hit countermeasures designed for each member of the team, including those that haven't joined yet..."

"Release the NetOps you've taken hostage at once!" the spandex-wearing clod who called himself Commander Beef demanded of the Nebula agent.

"Where the hell did you guys crawl out of?!" he demanded, looking them over. The mildly overweight Commander Beef in his budget spandex and sentai helmet, the masked ladies Black Rose and Misteriyu, even that Racer X kid in his yellow and black tracksuit masked with racing helmet and goggles.

"It doesn't matter, foul villain!" the Racer X kid – seriously, who the hell did these guys think they were?! – accused. "Surrender and face justice!"

"Like hell, you litt–"

"Dmitri," a voice cut into the Nebula agent's headset.

"Yes, Dr. Regal?" he whispered back, causing the self-styled superheroes to tense up.

"I have a new assignment for you."

"I'm kind of under attack at the moment, boss, so–"

A door behind him crashed as it was knocked off its hinges and he turned to see a tall straight-backed man in a train conductor's uniform and a mask, and holding a rather large pocketwatch, stroll in.

"Another one?!"

"The Iron Countryman reports successful rescue of the hostages, Commander Beef! Operation: Chameleon Capture proceeding on schedule!" the newcomer saluted and placed his oversized pocketwatch back in his pocket in a single motion.

"It sounds as if your current mission is a loss," Dr. Regal stated dryly over the man's helmet. "Just as well, this new mission is of far greater importance. Escape and contact me when you are secure."

"...Damnit!" the Nebula Agent known as Dimitri pulled out several smoke bombs and threw them.

"...and I have to admit that Zero may very well be our most valuable asset in the coming fight," Chaud sighed, "given that he's the navi whose abilities you and Megaman knew the least about."

"Personally," Protoman. exe piped up from Chaud's PET, "I'm wondering why you're telling us all this now. I doubt you were planning to. And why just us and not Baryl and Colonel?"

Chaud raised an eyebrow to support the inquiry, locking his gaze on Lan and making the other boy sweat.

"Okay... yeah... If we could have avoided Dr. Regal learning about the whole time travel and loop thing, then... you're right, we'd have kept quiet. I probably should have told Zero immediately after he agreed to be my temporary netnavi, but I couldn't even try to hide it after Dark Megaman blew the secret right in front of him. As for you two, I trust you guys completely, and..."

"Are you saying there's a reason not to trust Baryl and Colonel?" Chaud seemed surprised.

"NO!" Lan denied quickly. "No! At least, not while we're fighting Nebula... And so much is already different that I can't even be sure that what happened after that the first time for me even will anymore, so..."

"Right," Chaud nodded, "no judging people for a crime they might not even commit."

"Yeah, no, what I meant was that... in one of the future missions we'll be running, there's going to be an ambush, like the one that got Hub. First time around, it got either Protoman or Colonel."

"And you want us to be on the watch so neither are captured."

Lan looked pained at the assumption. "I'm... not sure that'll be possible. You see... If I remember correctly... The attack wasn't on either of them, it was on someone else and they jumped to protect only to be captured in the other's place. No time to think, just react."

Chaud was silent for several moments.

"I am sorry, Lord Chaud," Protoman. exe broke the silence, "but I would not act differently even if you ordered me to."

"Nor would I even consider doing so," Chaud sighed in acceptance. "Same with Baryl and Colonel."

"We got them back in the end," Lan said, "just..."

"Let me guess," Chaud smirked. "Colonel had to help save Protoman in one set of events and vice versa in the other."

"Yeah..."

"Do not forget that this time I am a part of events," Zero. exe reminded them. "I shall be willing to aid in the recovery of either Protoman or Colonel should the time come, even both if necessary."

"The sentiment is appreciated," Chaud nodded. "However, we still need to figure out how to deal with an army of Nebula mooks guarding their holdings in End Area. That many is best dealt with by a navi who has wide area of effect abilities. We need a crowd-clearer, not navis more suited to single strong opponents or small

groups. Though I have a suspicion you already know where we can find one."

"That depends on whether or not you had a mission for me regarding a certain cruise ship named the Queen Bohemia and a party hosted by Ubercorp," Lan smirked.

Chaud blinked rapidly. "Lan... how much have you been suppressing your need to talk about this to others?"

"You have *no* idea!"

"Again!" Tamako yelled to the two boys she was training.

Two, one might wonder? Dex had been a bit surprised to learn that he wasn't the only one Tamako was training. However, the other trainee wasn't learning the art of the fist.

He was learning the art of the blade.

"HAAAH!"

Thunk

Just... not a sword.

No, the boy Dingo, from the island of Jawaii and apparently good enough with his navi Tomahawkman. exe to compete in the Red Sun tournament even if he had lost in the first round, was learning the art of the axe. He was apparently referred to Tamako by a guy named Raoul, which made Dex wonder how a top Netopian netbattler knew Tamako. Regardless, Dex thought Dingo was a cool guy, even if he did have a weird habit of using his axe, or 'tomahawk' Dingo insisted it was called, to help him make decisions.

As for Tamako's training, Dex thought she was way better than the old man once you got past the fact that she wasn't as famous. She

had even higher standards if that was possible, but she knew which buttons to push to work him harder and which subjects were taboo.

Like suggesting someone was weak just because they got ambushed once.

"And stop!" Tamako called out, surprising both of them. It wasn't near time to end training for the day. They both looked over to where she was watching over their PETs to see her holding up Dex's. "Dex, your boss has a mission for you!"

"A mission?" Dingo blinked. "What? Are you some kind of secret agent or something?"

"Or something," Tamako shot back. "Best not ask questions."

"Actually..." Dex thought for a bit, looking at Dingo as he accepted his PET from Tamako, "Hey Baryl, this mission you got... think there's room for one more?"

"You're nothing compared to Nebula!" Larkman. exe screeched as he swiped past Hatman. exe, knocking the magician navi over, "NOTHING! The free skies of darkness shall not be overcome!"

"Your foul skies shall give way to clear ones this day!" Windman. exe bellowed with divine confidence as he unleashed several Round Tornados at the darkloid. "I, the god of wind so decree it!"

"Your decrees are worth less than you, false god!" Larkman. exe laughed as he evaded the attack. "Lark Drive!"

"Star Arrow!"

The stellar energy bolt from Stargirl. exe pierced Larkman. exe's chest as he dove forwards, causing the darkloid's eyes to widen in surprise as his attack aborted. Below, a giant card flipped over to reveal an image of an explosion before it vanished and just such an

explosion engulfed Larkman. exe. Without so much as a moment to recover, he was beset by a storm of digital birds that flew and cut like arrows, carving him to ribbons.

The three navis still standing watched as the Darkloid convulsed in pain before his body erupted in a detonation of DarkPower that left nothing behind, the taint of the area melting away with his demise to leave a much cleaner temple net through which blew a much kinder wind once more.

"Scissor Island's Temple of Wind has been reclaimed," Windman. exe spoke with audible relief and gratitude. "Thank you my friends. All of you."

"Heh... Anytime..." Dustman. exe limped forwards, he and the damaged Groundman. exe leaning on each other. "Someone's gotta... clean up the... messes these... Nebula guys made... might as... well be us..."

"I only wish we could have found out what happened to my NetOp and his son..." Hatman. exe lamented.

"We'll start asking around now that the island's free again," Stargirl. exe assured the magician navi. "Someone has to have seen something."

Hephaestus poked at his screen as he examined the coding around Scissor Island and its 'Temple of Wind'. Why was there an aspiring music conductor wearing a green tunic and a floppy hat living there?

"You guys got Scissor Island back?" Mayl grinned. "That's great! I'm so glad to hear it! I–Hold on, I've got another call coming in... Hello? Chaud? What is this about?"

"Raika," the young prodigy's superior barked to get the lieutenant's attention.

"Sir!" the best young net operative the Sharo military had snapped to attention.

"Get ready to move out. We just got word that Dmitri's been spotted in Electopia working for Nebula. I assume you understand what your mission is?"

Raika blinked and his militantly stoic expression twitched imperceptibly towards an expectant grin. "Loud and clear, sir."

"Thank you again for saving us," the stage magician informally known as Mr. Hat thanked the group who had come to everyone's rescue. He was especially grateful since the kidnapped individuals included his own son.

"All in a day's work, for the Agents of BEEF!" Commander Beef laughed, causing several of the former prisoners to sweatdrop.

"And thank you for helping us track him down," Black Rose turned to the man that had not only spotted the Nebula agent in his latest stolen identity kidnapping attempt; a trick that had kept the police in many jurisdictions busy chasing false leads; but had helped them crack the security

keeping them prisoner.

"It was the least I could do, huh," the man rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Dmitri and I have something of a history, huh..."

"Chargeman, take a message," Iron Countryman dictated where he was standing with a group of Netopians that had been held captive longer than most, and been taken farther from their homes. Among the group was a grim-faced Electopian woman and a short white-haired man. "To the Thunder Tribe from the Agents of BEEF: We've

located the missing NetOps of two of your members and will be arranging their return as soon as we can. Unfortunately, while his captives were rescued, the kidnapper managed to escape and remains at large..."

"This is your team?" Dingo whistled as he took in the figures of Princess Pride, Dark Miyabi, and Baryl in the middle of Scilab's command center. "Nice, very nice."

"Dingo Stormchaser," Baryl nodded. "I remember you and your navi from the Red Sun tournament."

"Heh..." Dingo rubbed his head sheepishly. "Well, you did a lot better than I did..."

"Regardless, you competed in a world-class tournament and this team is honored to have you. As you may know, Nebula has claimed several areas of the net across the globe, cutting off vital communications and stifling crucial services in many areas while they plan to expand their holdings. We are one of many strike teams dedicated to liberating these areas from Nebula's control and preventing their organization from claiming or reclaiming additional territory. Perhaps it is fortune that you were just recruited because our latest mission involves this:"

Baryl brought up the image of a luxury cruise liner on the display behind him.

"The S. S. Anne, a luxury passenger liner set to sail for Jawaii tomorrow. Our intel indicates that a powerful Nebula agent, a darkloid no less, has infiltrated the S. S. Anne's onboard network and intends to claim it as Nebula territory so they can use it as a mobile staging area to attack any port city network they come within range of while remaining able to disconnect themselves to prevent retaliation. Our mission is to board the ship with the other passengers and find the darkloid before their plan can be carried out or, if all else fails, liberate the ship's onboard network afterwards."

"So we know who the darkloid is?" Dex asked.

"As a matter of fact, we do," Baryl nodded, bringing up a new image. "The darkloid in question was recently forced to abandon his post in End Area to undertake this mission."

"Isn't..." Dex recognized the image from Lan's descriptions even as Dingo's wood-type navi spouted a few choice swear words. "Isn't that one of Mr. Match's navis?"

"He was," Baryl confirmed, "but Flameman, like several of the WWW's last crew, was customized with black market programs crafted by Nebula specifically to influence the navi with DarkPower, driving them mad and eventually into Nebula's clutches. Many ordinary operators have lost navis to Nebula after using a fraction of the kind of dark programs that were installed in Flameman. So each of you remember to bring a good folder of Aqua chips for the mission."

Hephaestus stared at the screen some more. He *knew* he'd heard the name S. S. Anne somewhere before...

"Oh, you need my invite to Ubercorp's party on the Queen Bohemia? Sure, Lan! Baryl kind of has us all headed out on a mission tomorrow, so I couldn't use it anyway. Plus, I'm not one for such parties in the first place. In any case, I hope you have fun!"

Lan shook his head. Princess Pride had been all too happy to give him her invite to Ubercorp's unveiling party aboard the Queen Bohemia.

"Man, that is one heck of a ship," Lan observed from the docks. Sure he had no less than two sets of memories aboard the thing in his head, but that failed to make it any less impressive.

"It is, isn't it?" a familiar and excited voice sounded from behind him. Turning around, he spotted about the last person he'd expected on this mission.

"Mayl?" he blinked in total confusion. "What are you doing here? And where did you get that dress?"

"Chaud thought you could use some backup if things went south," Mayl told him as she sauntered closer in the form-hugging Choinese number that left no doubt she was beginning to mature as a female, holding up her own invitation. "And Tesla thought you could use a date if they didn't. Besides, Dex is off with Colonel's team and some new hotshot recruit from Jawaii on their own mission, Yai's off somewhere with her family and my new friends from the shrine are all sleeping off a hangover after Lilly spiked the celebratory punch by accident."

Lan decided not to ask about that last bit.

"We should get on board quickly so we can get Lan into his suit," Roll. exe piped up before addressing Lan's PET. "Nice to meet you, Zero!"

"Wait, suit?" Lan blinked in confusion.

"A pleasure to meet you both miss Mayl, miss Roll," Zero. exe's voice chimed in from his PET. "I have just confirmed with the ship that a suit in Lan's size is awaiting him on board courtesy of Princess Pride. There should be plenty of time to get changed for the event before it begins."

'Well,' Lan thought as Mayl grabbed his arm and dragged him to the gangway so they could board, *'this could prove interesting.'*

"But, sssir!" the Nebula agent hissed into his PET.

" *No* , and that's an *order* ," the voice of Dark Megaman growled back. "You are to take no action regarding the booster program or the ship itself until further notice. There is another thief onboard the Queen Bohemia right now, and–"

Dark Megaman's voice cut off as he spotted the sight of Lan and Mayl over the Nebula agent's shoulder, resplendent in a cut-to-fit suit that Lan was tugging nervously at the collar of and a form-fitting Choinese dress that hugged Mayl's developing curves, and felt the soul of Hub surge with a pure joy that nearly crippled him. But he forced it back down with a vengeance and glared at the innocent Nebula agent with unrestricted hate.

"B-b-b-bossssss..." the man gulped.

"You are to stay out of sight and do *nothing* to call attention to yourself," Dark Megaman sneered at the quivering man. "Observe everything and stay to the shadows. The other thief will do most of the work in stealing the booster program and will serve to keep official agents onboard distracted. They will work to recover the booster program and you will *let* them. Then, and *only* then, will you do *exactly* as I tell you."

"Y-yesss, bossssss..."

"Good, now if you'll excuse me, there's another plan I'm overseeing today."

Dex let himself fall onto the bed of the interior room with a sigh. "Oh, man! Now *this* is living!"

Sure, Yai would find it substandard, but then her family probably owned three boats just like this one or something.

"It is a decadent sin," Dingo insisted. "An affront to pure and honest living in harmony with nature."

The boy's indignity was somewhat undercut by the way he was mirroring Dex's contentment, sprawling out on his own bed in the double room.

"We're going to have to do so much training to make up for this when we get back," Dex observed. "Laps, reps, sitting under the waterfall, all of it."

"So worth it," Dingo agreed.

"What do we do first? Pool, buffet, or netbattle machine?"

The two boys looked at each other and grinned in unison.

"All of the above!"

"I still think that guy looked suspicious," Lan grumbled as he let Mayl drag him out onto the deck.

"And I think he was just probably getting chewed out by his boss," Mayl insisted.

"Yeah, his Nebula boss, perhaps."

"And if you're right and he pulls something, we'll both go running to stop him," Mayl told him, getting an odd look from Lan. "What? Did you think this dress was cut high just to show off my legs?"

"Er..." Lan blushed to laughter from both of their PETs.

"Welcome!" a man in uniform greeted them as they stepped out on deck. "Good to have you aboard the Queen Bohemia! We've got a number of fun events before the main party begins! In a short while we'll be starting free netbattles, the captain is currently entertaining visitors on the bridge if you care to stop by for a chat, and and we also have a mystery stamp rally going on!"

"That sounds fun!" Mayl perked up.

"Well, then!" the man smiled. "Allow me to give you a stamp book with the clues so you can start finding them all and earn a nifty prize!"

The S. S. Anne was underway. Guests had stowed their luggage, many had begun milling about on deck and exploring their options for entertainment, and the ship was already a few hours out from port. And two particular individuals were in their shared room, doing precisely none of the things one might expect a grown and unrelated man and woman sharing a room on a cruise ship to be doing behind closed doors.

"So," Princess Pride spoke to Baryl as the two sat on their separated, by request, beds, "what's the plan?"

"Dark Miyabi has joined the ship's staff to look for possible agents, as it is doubtful that a navi as aggressive as Flameman will be able to infiltrate a system like this ship's with any degree of restraint or subtlety. If he's on board, then he has the aid of a NetOp."

"Agreed," Princess Pride nodded, "and I'm guessing this NetOp could be anyone among the guests or crew, correct?"

"That is the assumption. We will need to be on the lookout for any suspoicious activity at all ti–"

Baryl cut off suddenly and held up a hand as he turned towards the cabin door. Shuffling footsteps could be heard stopping just outside, followed by a muffled voice.

"This the room?"

"Yeah, this is the where the boss said they were," another answered.

"Okay, let's do this then."

The proclamation was followed by a series of clicking sounds that had Baryl's eyes widening before the cabin was beset by gunfire.

Dex and Dingo had drawn a huge crowd of people around the poolside netbattle machine to watch the two try to netbattle each other while operating with only one hand and eating with the other, the battle pausing so the respective NetOp having to swim a lap in the pool every time Gutsman. exe or Tomahawkman. exe took a solid blow from the other before resuming again.

It was wild.

It was ridiculous.

It was surprisingly skillful at times.

There were also a fair number of cross-counters, which always resulted in an impromptu one-lap swimming race by the boys, to the cheers of the crowd. And their navis.

"Dex! Dex! Dex! Dex! Dex! Dex!"

"Dingo! Dingo! Dingo!"

"Guts! Guts! Guts! Guts! Guts! Guts!"

"To-ma-hawk! To-ma-hawk!"

"AAIIIEEEEEE!"

The entire crowd froze and turned as one towards the scream to see a group of men walk out onto the deck holding guns before one fired a pistol into the air.

Bang-bang-bang

A lot of passengers screamed, many dropped to the ground, a bunch started running, and a few even pulled out guns of their own and

joined the attackers.

And at some point in the confusion, Dex and Dingo had managed to jack their navis out and slip away.

Dark Miyabi stood over the unconscious Nebula agent and debated his options. Once the ship had gotten a few hours out, a very literal mutiny had started among the crew, with armed Nebula agents revealing themselves and offering a very simple choice to the rest: surrender peacefully or die.

He hadn't stuck around to hear the rest of the crew's answers. He had a mission, and it had just gotten a *lot* harder...

Baryl lay on the carpet clutching his bleeding arm, his dive to the floor only mostly avoiding the surprise attack and unfortunately leaving him vulnerable to the Nebula agents that entered the cabin using what had to be a staff key. They were certainly being brazen about this, which did not bode well for the mission. They didn't fear knowledge of their actions among the ship, nor did they likely think anything could be done about it.

They also didn't see the uninjured Princess Pride hiding behind the wall until her foot collided with the first agent's face, sending him stumbling back into his partner who had stood far too close and tripping them both. The judicious use of the cabin's chair pinned them in place and prevented retaliation with their guns, and in under a minute, the princess of Creamland had the two Nebula agents disarmed, unconscious, and tied up in the cramped cabin shower stall.

Baryl had taken the opportunity field-dress his wound, and helped Pride with the last part.

"We can't stay here," he said as he shouldered one of the automatic rifles that the agents had been carrying, Princess pride doing the

same with the other. "We need to find a safe place to assess the situation."

"We also need to find the others," Pride insisted, and Baryl decided to debate the point later when they actually had the luxury.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know! Try jacking into the ship's network, maybe they know what's up?"

"Good idea! Jack in–"

" **FoR tHe GlOrY of NeBuLa!** "

"What the–?! What's wrong with my navi?!"

"I knew those customizer programs that guy was handing out were shady! 'Compliments of the cruise line' my ass!"

"Oh god... the ship is under attack, isn't it...? Where are our kids?!"

"What the hell is the hold up?"

"Apparently the captain is sharper than he looks. He managed to take out our agents on the bridge crew, seal the room, and lock us out. I think he's going to try and turn the ship around and make for port."

"That's a problem then, especially with how long the ritual's taking this far removed from the Murkland portal. Okay, we're going to have to do this the hard way. You three go to the engine room and make sure it's secure. Deal with any troublemakers you have to. The rest of you start rounding up passengers."

Dark Miyabi remained still around a corner, unheard and unseen by the group of Nebula agents, attempting to decide which task was the

more important. After a moment's deliberation, he decided to follow the group headed towards the engine room.

"Okay, I think we lost them," Dex huffed after having rushed down and up stairs and across corridors until he really wasn't all that sure where on the ship he and Dingo even were.

"I don't think they saw us leave in the first place, but yeah," Dingo steadied himself as well, keeping his voice down just in case he was wrong.

"Okay, you brats, line up against the wall and don't move."

Dex and Dingo froze and looked behind them to see... an open door. With muffled sniffles and sobs emanating from the room beyond. The plaque outside labeled it one of the places on the ship designed for young children.

Dex and Dingo exchanged looks, before Dingo pulled out the case he'd been carrying strapped to his side ever since boarding, even when swimming earlier, the one Baryl had to talk to security for an hour before Dingo was allowed to keep it, and opened it to reveal his axe.

"Oh, tomahawk of my ancestors," Dingo whispered as he grasped the handle and held the weapon before him like a divining rod, "guide me to the proper COURSE OF ACTION!"

"What the–?!" the Nebula agent in the room turned at the sudden yell to see Dingo dash past the doorway and throw his tomahawk blind. And straight at him. The sight of a whirling axe headed for his face induced a panic and he brought up his automatic rifle to block rather than trying to dodge or counterattack. The tomahawk clanged loudly against the firearm and drove it into the Nebula agent's face, disorienting him for a moment.

Just long enough for Dex to charge in with a "YAAAAAAAHHH!" and bury his right fist in the man's stomach, driving the air from his lungs and causing him to drop the rifle from reflex. The left cross he followed with sent the man to the floor where he moaned and went limp.

'I'madeadman,I'madeadman...' Dex chanted in his head, expecting any second that the man's partner would start shooting and he'd become a great deal more holey than he'd like. It took a couple of seconds of frantically looking for where certain death was coming from before he realized that the Nebula agent was alone. By that time, Dingo had entered the room, closed the door, locked it, and jammed it shut with a chair for good measure.

Dex looked down at the gun resting at his feet and promptly shoved it with his foot until it slid under a desk out of sight before looking around for material to tie the man up with.

"Well, that was rather quick," the crew member congratulated both Lan and Mayl on their completion of the stamp rally, which had been a fair bit more than just the three Lan recalled.

"We'd have been faster, but we took some time to talk with the captain when we got the wheel stamp," Mayl admitted.

"Did you now?" the crew member looked impressed. "Well, you've certainly earned this prize, then!" he beamed, handing them both a chip. Lan's eyes widened as he confirmed that the chips were DjangoSP navi chips.

"Whoa..."

"You're the fastest to finish the stamp rally, so I think a bit of a better prize is in order, yeah?" the man winked. "In any case, the free netbattles are about to start with a special opponent just for this cruise."

Lan turned to see a large heavyset man wearing a dark apron over a red and white shirt, heavy boots and pants, and with a white bandanna wrapped around his head that had a blue fireworks pattern on it. Fyrefox according to his... baseline memories? Was that the term? Dang it... of all the times for him to forget Hub's reminders about Django's speech...

"So Lan, you want to challenge him first or should I?" Mayl asked with a grin.

Lan was about to reply when an older man in an expensive three piece suit nearly ran into him in his drive to get to the netbattle machine first.

"He he he!" the man chuckled, rubbing his hands eagerly as he approached the netbattle machine on deck, not noticing that he'd perhaps cut ahead of anyone in his eagerness. "I've been looking forward to this! I spent 10 million zenny customizing my navi! I can't lose! He he!"

"He was probably waiting longer than we were," Mayl shrugged, getting a reluctant nod from Lan. "Too bad, I was looking forward to challenging the guest battler."

"Hmm..." Lan mused, thinking.

"I'll challenge you first!" the clearly rich man declared as he reached one side of the netbattle machine.

"Alright, then," Fyrefox snorted back. "Jack in and let's get started."

"Oy!" Lan called up at the two. "So sorry to interrupt, but my lovely lady friend here would like to challenge the winner of your netbattle!"

"Fine with me," the burly man in the bandana shrugged.

"It will be my pleasure to entertain a fine young lady like yourself!" the rich guy boasted.

"I really hope he didn't mean that as creepy as it sounded..." Mayl sweatdropped as the two guys jacked in to begin their netbattle.

"Just sit back and watch," Lan grinned. "I think the big guy's about to show that it takes more than a lot of money to make a strong navi."

"I wonder how Dex's mission is going..." Mayl wondered.

"Eh, I'm sure they're just fine."

Pride and Baryl snuck around another corner. They'd been slowly advancing along the ship, telling passengers and crew that weren't Nebula agents to get somewhere safe while trying to take out Nebula agents they came across as quickly and quietly as possible.

There had been some mixed results on that front, but at least neither of them had sustained further injuries.

The good news was that there didn't seem to be that many Nebula agents on board overall when compared to the total number of passengers and crew.

The bad news... was that someone had handed out a bunch of fast-acting corruptive customization programs that had turned many of the passengers' navis to Nebula's side. So even if they could secure the physical ship, taking back the ship's network would be the bigger problem.

They just needed to take this slowly. Assess the situation and come up with a pl–

Ding-dong

"Attention passengers," a distorted voice sounded over the intercom. "This is Nebula. We are taking control of the ship. However, there seems to be some resistance to our methods. The following people are to report to the atrium: Captain Waverly, Baryl *skrch*, Princess

Pride, Dex Oyama, and Dingo Stormchaser. If they do not report to the atrium and surrender themselves and control of the ship within thirty minutes, we will start executing passengers. Again, if the following individuals do not surrender to Nebula within thirty minutes–"

"Damnit..." Baryl swore.

"N-no way!" the rich man gulped as his expensive navi was shredded with ease. "I lost?! I-It's not possible! It cost me 10 million zenny to customize my navi! How can I be so outclassed?!"

'Maybe because you don't know the first thing about netbattling?' Lan thought with disdain. The match had been even more embarrassing to watch than he'd thought.

"Tsk!" Firefox scoffed loudly. "Netbattles have to be fought from the gut! Just spending a bunch of money to make your navi look tough doesn't cut it!"

"W-What did you say?!" the rich guy looked offended. Lan and Mayl, as well as a few others that had gathered to watch, looked unsympathetic. "Who let this lowlife on the ship?! I'll have you thrown overboard!"

"Wow... what a sore loser," Mayl blinked as the rich guy stormed off in a huff.

"Typical!" Fyrefox spat. "All rich people are pathetic! I hope the next challenger has a bit more nerve!"

"Thought I don't think the winner's much better..." she added.

The crew member running the stamp rally sighed heavily. "I invited him to spice up the netbattle challenge a bit. He's an old friend of mine named Fyrefox and no one's ever been able to beat him that I've seen."

"Well, let's see if the lovely lady can change that," Lan performed a bow with a sweeping motion inviting Mayl to step up and challenge the man. "

"Don't mind if I do," Mayl strolled up to the machine to cheers from the gathered crowd. "I'm Mayl Sakurai and I'll take you on!"

"A with lady with guts!" Fyrefox grinned. "Take care you don't strain yourself, missy!"

"Bring it on!" Mayl declared. "Jack in! Roll! Execute!"

Jesse Rocquet and her brother James weren't the most well-off of children. For one, the only reason they lived on a cruise ship was because their single dad worked there and got special permission from his boss. For another, their dad couldn't really afford to get them their own PETs since he was trying to save everything he could to get a home back on land for them all as well as put them both through school (which was also something of an interesting issue given their circumstances). In fact, the two of them had to share a PET and navi that had originally been left behind by a careless passenger and never claimed.

"Thirty minutes?"

"Yeah, not a lot of time to find and stop Flameman in the ship's system..."

That said, the two kids were made of some pretty resilient stuff as kids went. So when the two older boys that had stormed into the children's zone and taken out the bad guy started talking about how they needed help to take out a bad navi in the ship's computers, they volunteered immediately.

"Umm..." Jesse spoke up first. "Our navi knows her way around the ship pretty well... She can help you..."

"Yeah!" James added eagerly. "Meowtan's awesome! She can help you send the bad guys blasting off at the speed of light!"

"Meow! That's right!"

"I..." *wham* "thought..." *wham* "I..." *wham* "plugged..." *wham* "those..." *wham* "code..." *wham* "leaks..."

Roll. exe pressed herself to move faster than she'd ever done before as the walking purple arsenal known as Napalmman. exe did his best to blast her with rapid fire vulcan cannons on each arm and a flame-based bomb launcher on the top of his head. It was hard to do, and she could see how he and his operator had gone undefeated for so long. So few navis could evade the onslaught of weaponry that Napalmman. exe brought to bear, even one-on-one which was his clear weakness.

Against a large group, with his ability to cover wide areas with raw power and high damage, he'd be a total monster.

She felt her intent sync up with Mayl's and knew that her operator had realized the same thing. Chaud had told them about the small army of Nebula navis preventing access to the captured and corrupted Megaman. exe. Preventing them from saving Lan's partner and brother. He'd asked them to keep an eye out for anyone who might be able to even the odds a bit, and the duo of Fyrefox and Napalmman. exe were perfect.

Once more, for the first time since Megaman. exe's capture, Mayl and Roll. exe's wills became one and they prepared to unleash their power on their opponents. After all, it was clear the two respected strength, which meant that they'd have to prove theirs if they wanted a shot at recruiting him.

"Y-You'll n-n-never defeat N-Nebula..." the agent groaned out before losing consciousness and slumping up against the engine control console, bleeding from the head wound he'd taken.

Dark Miyabi said nothing in reply, concluding it to be pointless, as he surveyed the area. He *thought* he'd gotten them all, but...

He shook his head. No time to second guess things. The mission was now on a time limit. And from the looks of things, someone on Nebula's side had overridden the controls.

"Shadowman," he spoke.

"Sir," came the reply from his PET.

"Jack in and disable the engines from within. I shall do the same manually. Even if Nebula claims the ship, they shall gain no victory from it."

"Understood."

"There's too many of them," Pride reported as she snuck back to her and Baryl's hiding spot from peeking into the atrium. "Even if we take a few out, we'll never get them all before they start shooting hostages."

"I suspected as much... Okay, here's what we'll do..."

"Dear me, but that was quite the battle young lady!" yet another guest tittered, much to Mayl's embarrassment and Lan's amusement.

"That's my girlfriend!" Lan beamed. "Beauty beyond compare and skill more valuable than 10 million zenny!"

Several guests who had overheard, or at least heard of, the protestations of the first netbattle challenger laughed.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the amplified voice broke through the various conversations around the room, drawing everyone's attention to the Ubercorp representative on the stage next to the special ViewComp. "I would like to thank you all for attending this party today, where we at Ubercorp are proud to unveil our new booster system!"

The announcement was greeted with polite and eager applause.

"When added to any existing program," the company representative continued, "this booster system radically enhances the program's performance. Construction work, software R&D... it can be used with anything, including, of course, NetNavis! And we are offering this amazing system for the low price of just three hundred million zenny!"

"Th-three hundred...?" Mayl gaped.

"How much you want to bet Yai would call it a bargain?" Lan asked.

"Three hundred million...? What a bargain!" a man near the two exclaimed as if to prove Lan's claim. "Let's see the device then!"

"Case in point," Lan tilted his head.

"B-but... I... I guess I never really thought about it..." Mayl admitted. "I mean, Yai's our friend and she's rich, but she never makes that big a deal about it really."

"I'd still bet your skill against that thing," Lan smiled as the presentation went on, showing the booster system itself inside the ViewComp surrounded by a squad of GuardNavis (49) that were all enhanced by the booster system as well, supposedly making them ten times stronger than they would otherwise be.

"Really?" Mayl blinked as the Ubercorp representative prepared to give a live demonstration of what the booster system was capable of–

–when the lights went out.

Meowtan. exe could be said to be feline themed. If cat ears, tail, and paw-like gloves stuck onto a shapely female form navi modded to appear like some adolescent male's personal trainer fantasy come true, leotard and legwarmers included, was enough to constitute a feline theme.

Dex, Dingo, Gutsman. exe, and Tomahawkman. exe had all tried to excuse the redness in their faces as being due to fighting off Nebula.

"I know exactly what I look like, meow," Meowtan. exe had rolled her eyes at the excuse. *"My original operator was a perv, meow. Jesse and James were nice enough to find me something more modest than that stupid...* thing *... the lech had me in when he forgot me, meow. They're good kids, meow."*

That had been as much an explanation as was forthcoming, and she'd begun leading Gutsman. exe and Tomahawkman. exe through the ship's systems, following navis corrupted by DarkPower to serve Nebula against their will, and taking shortcuts through employee access areas when necessary.

"Here we are..." Meowtan. exe paused as she approached the next link. The one all the Nebula-corrupted navis were gathering towards. "The ship's communication center. You know... I'd have expected the captain's navi to try something by now... He's pretty strong after all."

"Well, we're what ya've got and the clock's tickin'," Gutsman. exe reminded her.

Nodding, Meowtan. exe led the two through the link, and immediately gasped at what she saw on the other end.

"Why don't you put your little peashooter down ya whippersnapper and let me show you how a real man settles things?"

"Shut it, old man," the lead Nebula agent snapped for the umpteenth time, his patience with a couple of his hostages wearing thin to the point that if he had to listen to them anymore, he wasn't going to wait until the thirty minute deadline.

"Why don't you come here and say that to our faces, ya good for nothing!"

And there went the other one. He was glad for the face mask he was wearing, because it was the only thing preventing the hostages from seeing just how much those two old coots were getting to him.

"He said shut it, geezer!" another agent snapped, followed by a thwack as he struck the offending hostage with the butt of his rifle.

"Grampa!"

"Cool it," the lead agent ordered. "Let them spend their last moments however they wish. It's all futile in the end. None resist Nebula for long."

"Of course, sir."

"Sir," a new voice spoke and the lead agent turned to see two more masked agents joining them carrying automatic rifles. "The boss has ordered you topside for assistance. We're to take over watching the hostages."

He blinked, looking the two new agents over carefully. One male, one female. Dressed in Nebula uniforms and masks. Absolutely nothing seemed odd about them, except for that one minor detail.

"Interesting," he replied, drawing his pistol and pointing it at them, "except that I'm the boss of this mission."

Their reactions were quick, pointing their rifles straight at him. The reactions of the other true Nebula agents in the room pointing their guns at the pair were just as quick.

"...Damnit."

"A nice try though," he commended them. "Too bad fate favors Nebul–"

A chair to the back of the head cut him off as several of the hostages took the Nebula agents' mutual distraction for the opening it was and attacked. The sound of gunfire followed and the atrium descended into pandemonium.

"That's the captain's navi!" Meowtan. exe barely kept from screaming and alerting the couple hundred Nebula and Nebula-corrupted navis in the communication's center. All around were large cyber candles burning with a purple flame, and in the center was a large beast-like, almost demonic even, navi whose body burned with flames as purple as those of the candles, two of which flanked him.

That was Flameman. exe of course, with his back to the three intruders. The figure Meowtan. exe was referring to was the navi designed like a naval captain in full military dress, complete with ceremonial sabre, but battered almost beyond recognition and hung in the air just past Flameman. exe like he was being crucified. Or possibly sacrificed.

"N'Boooraaa F'Waaaar..." Flameman. exe chanted gutterally, dark flames dancing over his form and the cyber candles alike.
"G'laaayuu F'wooooosshh..."

"So..." the naval navi coughed weakly, "you always sacrifice navis like this?"

"Oh, no," a Nebula HeelNavi chuckled from next to the prisoner. "It's hardly necessary for our purposes, but sometimes you just like to go

the extra mile."

"We have to save him!" Meowtan. exe hissed.

"We will, you just stay back and leave it to u–" Tomahawkman. exe began, only to be cut off by another gasp from Meowtan. exe as the Nebula HeelNavi took out a large cyberknife and darted forwards without her two companions.

"HEY CREEP!" the felinesque navi yelled, forming an odd cannon. "GUESS WHAT DAY IT IS?!"

The shout drew all couple hundred navis' attentions as the shot rang out, sped across the distance, and struck the HeelNavi in his surprised face before exploding into a small shower of digital zenny coins.

There was a bit of stunned silence.

"Did... did you just shoot me with *money* ?!"

"Um... yes?" Meowtan. exe winced. She'd expected a bit more out of that. Especially given how much of Jesse and James's allowance she'd put into it. She'd need to scrape up loose digital change for at least a week to replace that.

"Kill her," the HeelNavi ordered, prompting the couple hundred other navis present to charge her.

"You guys should use the hero speech we made!"

"Yeah!"

Dex and Dingo looked at each other and shrugged.

"Sure thing, kiddo."

"But we do it our way."

"Not so fast!" Tomahawkman. exe yelled, landing in front of Meowtan. exe and swinging his axe in a wide sweep, sending out a cutting shockwave that bisected over a dozen of the foremost attackers. "You guys should prepare for trouble!"

The entire area shook as Gutsman. exe landed next to the feathered warrior navi with a double-fisted hammer blow, knocking most of the attackers off their feet. "And while yer at it, make it double!"

"Pledged to protect the world from devastation!"

"By unitin' warriors from every nation!"

"Forged in fires of darkness and strife,"

"Our strength'll be unbroken fer life!"

"We're Team Colonel, fighting for Justice and Light!"

"Ya get *one* chance ta surrender 'fore ya lose this fight!"

"Meow! That's right!"

Terry moped around in his cheap, dingy one room (heck, a quarter-room) apartment – all he could afford since being publicly disowned – feeling sorry for himself. Which was pretty much what he did every day. He did odd jobs to meet the bare minimum of his bills, and pretty much left Sparkman. exe to do the same on the net. (50)

There was apparently trouble going on, but he really didn't care anymore. His life was over after all. What was left? He'd been kicked out, cut off, and stripped of all his resources. His dreams for a robot lab were done for. He went through the motions of life out of habit, nothing el–

knock-knock-knock

'Go away,' he groused silently, having long since learned that doing so out loud achieved the opposite more often than not.

knock-knock-knock

'No one's home, you're wasting your time.'

knock-knock-knock

'Maybe it's the mob come to put me out of my misery...'

rattle... jimmy... click

Terry's eyes widened slightly as the lock on his door was picked and it swung open to reveal three people standing there. He thought he recognized one from that stupid Den City netbattle tournament a while back... the guy with the flame red hair and pointed goatee. There was another guy there dressed like he was going for a hike, but otherwise forgettable, plus a boy in front sticking a lockpick into his pocket. The boy had pale skin, chalk gray hair, and eyes so red that Terry was half sure a demon had come to claim his soul.

"Terry Jomon, I presume," the boy stated.

"You got the wrong guy," Terry snorted, not even bothering to get up. He was that far past caring. "I'm no Jomon."

"Yeah, I remember that, laddie," the red haired man smirked. "Quite the public debacle that was."

"What do you want?"

"You," the boy replied bluntly. "We need you for a job."

"Then you wasted your time," Terry shrugged listlessly.

"Listen here, you..." the backpacker made to lunge at Terry in anger, only to be stopped by a gesture from the gray-haired boy... had to be an albino Terry thought.

"My apologies then," the boy stared at Terry so intently that he felt a bead of cold sweat trickle down the back of his neck. "I thought I was talking to a prodigy with electronics and robotics. Perhaps I was mistaken."

"Whatever..."

"You see, we are in need of such an expert to rescue a friend of ours who is held by systems so state of the art most people have never heard of them."

Terry felt a twinge of interest in the back of his head. The kind of interest he used to feel working on his robotics projects using discarded items from his grandfather's store. The kind of interest he'd had when he'd designed Sparkman. exe, ungrateful little hoodlum that he was, from scratch. But he didn't let it show.

"What's in it for us?" the voice of Sparkman. exe spoke up from Terry's PET unbidden, causing him to glance at the screen and see his navi, so self-sufficient that he was nearly independent. How long had it been since they'd actually worked together on anything?

The albino boy stepped forwards, somehow managing to stare both Terry and Sparkman. exe in the eye at the same time with his unnervingly red gaze, driving an identical spike of fear into both as he seemed to peer straight into their souls.

"A second chance."

Mayl blinked as she watched Lan climb out of a ventilation shaft in front of her on deck, his formerly pristine suit rumpled from the act. When the lights had come back on, the theft of the booster system was clear. As was the fact that whoever had stolen it had easily defeated all eight of the boosted GuardNavis protecting it.

There had been some pandemonium as various guests started pointing fingers, accusing anyone in the room who looked even

slightly suspicious (plus a few accusations that were probably fueled by grudges and spite more than anything else). At least until Lan had pointed out that the decorative mirrors lining the room were arranged in such a way that the thief could have wirelessly jacked into the ViewComp from outside the room. A quick flash of their Official NetBattler licenses, a double-S (Mayl had relished the surprise on Lan's face just a bit) and a triple-S, convinced all but the most stubborn of naysayers that they were on the level and they'd been allowed out while the room guards kept everyone else inside for questioning just in case.

They'd split up then, Lan headed towards the engine room as Mayl went out on deck, with an agreement that they'd contact each other the moment they found anything.

She hadn't expected to meet back up with Lan like this.

"Okay, so..."

"Either he came out on deck straight from the hallway, or he snuck out here through the vent system like I did," Lan said while he did his best to dust his suit off and straighten it.

"Th... they bridge!" a crew member stumbled their way, looking bruised. "They've... hijacked the ship... ungh..."

"Are you okay?" Mayl ran to check on the man.

"I'll just lay here until the deck stops rolling..."

Lan and Mayl looked at each other. The Queen Bohemia was so advanced and smooth-sailing that they could barely tell they were at sea.

"I think he'll be fine for now," Mayl admitted after a moment. "There's nothing I can help with at least."

"Okay then, let's get to the bridge!"

Mayl followed Lan into the ship's bridge to confront whoever was behind this, and felt herself brought up short when she saw the man from before. The netbattler Fyrefox...

"What...? Fyrefox... Why are you...?"

"Well, well..." the burly man looked back at them levelly, "if it isn't the lady from before and her boyfriend..."

"Fyrefox, what are you doing?!" Lan demanded.

"What am I doing?" Fyrefox blinked as if he thought it should have been obvious. "With the booster system, my fireworks will be bigger and more spectacular than anyone else's!"

"Fireworks?" Mayl blinked. She didn't think any amount of program enhancement would affect real world fireworks.

"Yeah, fireworks," Fyrefox repeated. "I work with normal fireworks, but I also make cyber fireworks as well! And I'll do whatever it takes to make mine bigger, got it?"

"But–" Mayl started, only to be interrupted as Fyrefox continued.

"If you really want the booster system back, then jack in and take on my navi in the ShipComp. Only this time..." Fyrefox grinned. "This time I want to see your boyfriend in action."

Lan and Mayl both blinked as one.

"I already know the lady's got guts," Fyrefox smirked. "Time to see if her boy's got 'em too."

Lan looked at Mayl and shrugged. "If that's how it has to be..."

"Then that's how it has to be. Help him out, Zero."

"But of course," the viral navi replied from Lan's PET.

The atrium was chaos and pandemonium. Baryl was bleeding from his leg, Pride had taken a bullet to her side in the confusion, and several of the hostages were injured after the surprise charge against their captors. But the Nebula agents were down and most weren't getting back up.

Except for one who was pulling out a PET...

"For Nebula!" he yelled, jacking his navi into something that seemed innocuous enough. A centerpiece for the atrium, at least until it opened up to reveal something that screamed 'explosive device' to Baryl's instincts. "Hahaha! You'll never stop my navi before he activates–"

"That's what you think you reprobate!" one of the old men who had led the charge yelled as he pulled out a PET of his own. "Get that upstart Topman!"

"Not if Kiteman gets him first!" another old man who could have been the first's twin joined the action.

"Hey, wha–" the voice of a navi from the device yelled out as the old men's navis jacked in after him. "Stop righ–Gah! What are yo–ARGH! That doesn't ben–EEEEYYOOOWW! DR. REGAL, SAVE M–!"

"What was that?" Baryl stared at the agent intently, standing tall despite his injury and looming over the other man.

"...I surrender?" the Nebula agent squeaked.

A couple hundred navis serving Nebula, willingly or otherwise, had charged the interlopers.

"Tomahawk Swing!"

"Program Advance! MOMQUAKE!"

They were getting their asses handed to them.

"Screw this..." the HeelNavi that had been assigned as Lord Flameman's interpreter snorted. "We're cutting straight to the chase..."

He readied his ceremonial cyberknife to carve open the captain's navi as his lord continued his chant. It might be strictly unnecessary, but the sacrifice of the navi's powerful spirit to the DarkPower would still serve to open the DarkHoles that much faster, and accomplish their goals that much sooner.

"Hold still..." he chuckled at the maritime navi. "This won't hurt... for long."

"WAVEMAN!" the feminine scream echoed from the other side of the melee. (51)

"Don't you worry none! GUTSSHOOT!"

He paid no attention to the sounds behind him as he raised the cyberknife high and–

"Heh..." the crucified sacrifice smiled at something behind him, but he wasn't about to fall for that old trick. "Incoming..."

Ignoring the attempt to delay, the HeelNavi prepared to make the sacrifice even as the sound of a dopplered scream registered as heading straight for him.

"What the–?" his resolve to not be tricked lost to his curiosity and he turned just in time to take a ballistic navi straight to the chest. The impact bowled him over and both he and the ballistic navi went tumbling under the sacrificial navi for a good ways before grinding to a halt.

"Me-owch..." the navi that had hit him groaned as she stood. Some pathetic little thing designed for leisure from the looks of it.

"Well..." he mused as he got to his feet and readied his cyberknife. "One sacrifice is as good as another at this point."

The female navi twitched. "You know what I hate most besides creeps? Getting hand-outs. I don't care what everyone thinks, I'm no charity case and neither are the twins. But I get donating to a good cause."

"Then you'll be glad to donate your life to the cause of Nebula!" he laughed, stalking towards her with purpose.

"I'm thinking more of the donation I just got towards the cause of kicking your ass," she hissed back, forming one of her paw hands into an odd-looking buster. "IT'S PAYDAY, CREEP!"

The blast struck him like a truck, before erupting into a very literal explosion of zenny.

"We gotta take out those candles!" Gutsman. exe yelled having noticed that a few of the purple candle flames had gone out when stray attacks hit them.

"I've got an idea!" Tomahawkman. exe called back. "Totem Pole!"

A pair of totem poles rose out from behind Tomahawkman. exe and Gutsman. exe grinned.

"Now I got an idea!" he yelled as he smashed the ground in a hammer blow, causing the totem poles to jump into the air where he grabbed them and then flung them upwards. They lanced high into the digital sky, twinkling in the distance and there was a moment's pause before dozens of twinkles came back as totem pieces rained back down.

"TOTEM RAIN!" they yelled together as the falling objects put out every candle except two. The ones flanking Flameman. exe himself.

"R'eegaaall K'Boooom..."

"So..." Napalmman. exe stated calmly.

"I understand wanting to battle," Zero. exe stated back with equal calm, "but we would have been honored to oblige without the need for a theft of this nature. We are already busy dealing with the DarkChip syndicate Nebula, and we do not need your arrest added to our duties. Return the booster system immediately and we shall be lenient."

"Hehehe...no," the walking arsenal refused. "We need this for our fireworks, so if you

want it back you'll have to beat us!"

"Very well then," Zero. exe sighed before igniting his Z-Saber. "Beat you we shall."

"I'll tear you apart first!" Napalmman. exe got into a stance that brought both of his gun arms and his head-mounted missile launcher to bear on Zero. exe. "FIRE!"

"AreaSteal!" Lan shouted.

Zero. exe vanished as the spot where he'd been standing was practically obliterated by the onslaught of bullets and flame bombs.

"Z-Saber!" his yell came from behind the walking tank as he slashed once, twice, thrice, and a fourth that unleashed a sonic shockwave that staggered the heavy navi.

"VulcanGun! BattleChips in! Download!" Fyrefox yelled, and a pair of guns popped up from the ground to take aim at Zero. exe.

"Invisible!" Lan countered with a chip to make his current navi vanish.

"Wide area attack!" Fyrefox ordered, and Napalmman. exe unleashed his vast firepower on everything around him, but nothing seemed to connect until–

"StepShield."

One bomb connected with a suddenly visible Zero. exe behind a barrier, who then vanished to reappear right in front of Napalmman. exe, far too close to attack with his armaments, his Z-Saber held for a rising strike.

"Holy Thunder Saber!"

The rising slash lifted Napalmman. exe off his feet.

"Triple Mag Saber!"

The spinning descending slash spiked him back into the ground.

"Napalmman! Get up! Counterattack!" Fyrefox urged as Zero. exe got into an odd stance and began gathering energy around his Z-Saber.

"Phantom–"

"Napalm–"

"ZERO!"

The large shockwave carved through the cannon on top of Napalmman. exe's head, and a large portion of the digital wall directly behind him, shocking the armed navi at how close he'd just come to being bisected. And he had no illusions that it could have happened. He'd just been spared very deliberately.

"It's over," Zero. exe declared. "The booster system is in my possession."

"Wha...?" Napalmman. exe blinked in shock.

"I recovered it while invisible," Zero. exe elaborated.

"Exactly as planned," Lan's grin was audible.

"As much as I would like to believe you would honor your word, we could take no chances," Zero. exe explained.

"You... You stole my fireworks dream!" Fyrefox gaped in dismay.

"Can it!" Mayl interrupted heatedly. "You honestly think you could make the fireworks you wanted with something you stole? Thinking you could rely on a magic solution rather than your own hard work and vision? What kind of craftsman are you? If you can't make your fireworks with your own heart, then you dishonor their meaning! Would you really disgrace your profession with fireworks devoid of feeling and lacking your own effort?!"

"Tomahawk Air Raid!" Tomahawkman. exe led by throwing his axe, the weapon spinning as it flew towards the burning purple and chanting Flameman. exe.

"Rocket Guts Punch!" Gutsman. exe sent a flying fist along.

The two projectiles flew straight and true at their target, impacting Flameman. exe head on... and being incinerated by the dark flames covering his form.

"Aw, nuts..." Gutsman. exe swore as an irritated Flameman. exe finally turned in their direction. "Well, only one thing ta do..."

"CHARGE!" Tomahawkman. exe agreed and the two navis did exactly that, charging full tilt at their seemingly invincible opponent who reared back as they approached, drawing in a deep dark breath and causing the Wood-element Tomahawkman. exe's eyes to widen. "Oh crap..."

"D'haarreek F'lllaaaayymmm...!"

Meowtan. exe fell back, clutching her chest where she'd just taken a hefty cut from the HeelNavi she was fighting. She'd gotten a good hit in with the most powerful Payday she'd probably ever fired at the beginning, but...

Well, that was the *only* shot she'd landed.

The quick donations from Dex and Dingo, using their 'virus busting funds', had given her zenny-powered Payday shot enough oomph to really hurt the creep with the cyberknife, but... he was more experienced. He sidestepped all the follow-up shots to close in and batted aside her claw attacks like they were a mere annoyance to slash at her with the knife before falling back to taunt her. And even with the generous donation, the zenny was quickly running out...

"Meowit..." she cursed as she pointed her payday cannon at the HeelNavi and didn't fire.

"Aw, all out of zenny?" the HeelNavi chuckled. "Good."

He dashed forwards in a burst of speed that Meowtan. exe barely followed and stabbed, burying the knife right below her cat-paw navi mark.

"Urk..."

"Too bad you wasted it all earlier," the HeelNavi laughed at her pain.

"Waste...?" Meowtan. exe chuckled back weakly, pressing the still-formed cannon more firmly into the HeelNavi's chest. "Jesse and James... taught me how to *save* ..."

"F–" the HeelNavi was blown back by another eruption of zenny, losing his grip on his knife as Meowtan. exe was blown back as well to land below the captain's navi. Waveman. exe.

She hurt. She really did. But the creep was getting back up with only a few more bumps and bruises than before. She wasn't going to beat him. But she knew someone who could.

Pulling the knife out, she stood and started using it to cut Waveman. exe free of his bonds, ignoring the angry shouts of the creep. She kept it up when he started shooting her with his normal buster, running towards her. Instead, she pulled a FullEnergy subchip out that Jessie, James, and she had been saving and gave it to Waveman. exe.

She managed to remain conscious long enough to see the captain's navi bisect the creep with a crescent wave of water from his navy sabre.

Tomahawkman. exe had been sure he was about to become tribal warrior charcoal when he was lifted up and thrown over Flameman. exe just before the spray of dark purple flames issued forth, engulfing Gutsman. exe in its unholy inferno. The sinister purple flames of the candles on either side of Flameman. exe flared brighter as the net area suddenly grew darker and he knew what had to be done.

"Give it everything we got, Dingo!" he yelled the moment his feet hit the ground behind Flameman. exe and he charged, ignoring the spectral purple wisps that rose to impede his progress and raising his tomahawk hand high.

"You got it!" Dingo replied, their wills becoming one and their synchronization going through the roof. They thought as one. They acted as one. They swung as one.

"TOMAHAWK SWING!"

The biggest shockwave they'd ever produced with that attack blasted forth, sweeping just over the ground and striking Flameman. exe hard enough that the purple flames covering him flared up angrily,

but no damage was dealt. At least not to him. The wicks of the candles flanking him on the other hand were severed below the flames and snuffed in an instant, taking the spectral wisps and Flameman. exe's protective covering with them.

"Hwaaarrrh?!" Flameman. exe roared in anger and confusion.

"That's more like it!" Gutsman. exe's voice called out and Tomahawkman. exe felt relief that his new friend hadn't been deleted. "Dex! You got the chips?"

"Right here! In and downloaded!"

"COLDPUNCH!" Gutsman. exe landed one of the Aqua-element punches in Flameman. exe's stomach, followed by a second in a right hook, a third in a left cross, and finishing with a ColdPunch uppercut.

"Dingo!" Tomahawkman. exe called out.

"Got it! Totem Pole! AquaBlade!"

Tomahawkman. exe jumped atop the risen totem and raised his axe to gather the energy of the second chip. *'Spirits of our ancestors, guide my tomahawk!'*

He jumped towards the recovering Flameman. exe, his tomahawk glowing blue from the aque element infusion. "Tomahawk Rolling!"

"GWAAARRR!" Flameman. exe roared in pain as the attack connected and he retaliated with flametowers that didn't even come close to connecting.

"Program Advance!" Gutsman. exe yelled. "BubbleSpread!"

Flameman. exe's even louder roar was distorted by the mass of bubbles that erupted around him.

"Tomahawk Swing!"

The blade of the tomahawk buried itself in Flameman. exe's forehead. A moment later and the practically demonic flame navi split in half before disintegrating.

"...You're right," Fyrefox hung his head in shame as Mayl finally finished berating him for his theft. "I've been so fixated on making the best fireworks... I forgot what should be most important to a craftsman."

"I think we can overlook it this once," Lan offered. "Right Zero?"

"No," the viral navi disagreed, surprising everyone. And then his tone changed to one that implied a playful smirk. "At least not without some community service to make up for the trouble. Such as helping us fight Nebula."

"Wha–?" Fyrefox sputtered. "You want me to help you fight Nebula? I-I was gonna offer, but I didn't think... I-I still have a lot to learn. But in the fireworks of battle, I could improve. Then one day my fireworks will be the best! Right, Napalmman?!"

"Battle Nebula...?" the heavy artillery navi mused. "Give a bunch of bad guys a good pounding...? Sounds good to me!"

"Then it's settled," Mayl nodded firmly. "Welcome to Team Proto!"

Baryl was in the middle of helping one of the passengers, a doctor, tend to the wounded when another Nebula agent strolled into the room armed and caught them all flatfooted.

"Consarn it!" one of the old men swore, getting up and looking ready to charge the Nebula agent despite the agent having a gun and the old man having little more than an irascible mean streak.

"Ah..." the newcomer seemed surprised. "I see you already have things well in hand."

"...Blast it all Miyabi," Baryl breathed out the tension in his body as the mercenary removed the pilfered mask he wore, "don't scare me like that."

"I'll just make sure there aren't any more left before turning the engines back on," Dark Miyabi said as he turned and walked out of the atrium, leaving those capable to tend the wounded.

Baryl blinked. He hadn't even realized someone had turned the engines off in the first place until just then...

The booster program was returned without further incident and Ubercorp, at the urging of the young licensed netbattlers, had agreed not to press charges. And still his boss, the scary converted blue navi, had told him to wait.

Wait as the party resumed with no issues and orders were placed, though perhaps a bit fewer than expected and with a fair bit more haggling after it was shown that eight boosted navis had been no match for one customized navi with a decent operator. Skill, it seemed, thoroughly trumped even the highly touted booster system.

And still he waited for his orders.

The party wound down, several people challenged the young netbattlers to friendly matches, the ship turned towards port, and he kept waiting.

Then he got his orders and he had serious trouble believing them. Nebula wanting the booster system he could understand, the thing was cutting edge at its finest. This though...?

But one glare from the scary blue navi and he stopped protesting. It was one of those glares that promised bad things if you argued. He'd seen it happen before, and so he waited as the ship sailed back into port. He waited as it docked. He waited as the party guests for this day cruise all lined up to disembark and followed the two young

netbattlers and the bug guy they'd caught. He followed them down to the docks and off across until the boy remembered that he'd left his regular clothes on board and turned to retrieve them, telling the other two to wait for him.

Well, that was the best chance he was likely to get. He followed the boy back to the boarding area and watched him go back to get his things. He waited patiently until the boy returned, having changed and apparently carrying his suit in a hanging bag to boot. He pulled out his own bag as the boy approached and when he had the perfect opportunity, he struck, shoving the bag over the boy's head–

Hephaestus froze as the Nebula agent who was supposed to be a thief grabbed Lan, lifted him off the ground, and started running. The moment the bag had been shoved over Lan's head the success chances of the Loop had plummeted into single digits.

He needed to do something fast before the kidnapper got away. If Lan was placed into Regal's clutches at this stage, then–

–out of nowhere a burly arm appeared and he ran into it neck first, his head coming to a halt as his lower body tried to keep moving forwards from momentum, sending him horizontal for a brief moment before gravity took over. He hit the pavement of the dock hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs and idly noted that he'd lost the boy in the impact.

Hephaestus breathed a sigh of relief as the success chances returned to where they'd been before. Perhaps even a percent or two higher.

"Thank you for such a timely intervention," Zero. exe declared from Lan's PET that he'd somehow managed to keep a hold of.

"Thank Fyrefox," Mayl replied as she took the bag off of Lan's head while the aforementioned man kept the would-be kidnapper pinned. "He noticed the guy following us. Lan was right. He *was* up to no good..."

"Okay, everyone, this is it," Charlie (52) spoke up from across his connection. "This is where Nebula's been jamming international communications from, preventing the world from launching an organized counterattack."

"It was a pain to arrange a signal that could get us into the satellite system even through the interference, but here we are," Kalinka reminded them.

"Speaking of interference, how's that door coming Gateman?" Quint. exe asked.

"Almost ready," Gateman. exe reported from just outside the static interference barrier preventing entrance into the Dark Area controlling the satellite.

"Everyone know their job once we're in?" Punk. exe asked.

"Defense," the androgynous Enker. exe replied readily.

"Blow the crap out of the DarkHoles," Ballade. exe grinned.

"Discipline off the foul miscreants they dare to send our way!" Kendoman. exe laughed.

"Open a path to the darkloid in charge," Gateman. exe confirmed as he continued working on making a doorway.

"Support as needed," Quint. exe nodded, summoning his support program Sakugarne.

"...run interference if we're counterattacked and push forwards with the team when we have the advantage," Gridman. exe sighed last from a sitting position. "Don't run off by myself."

"Yeah, we don't need a repeat of what happened with Vineman," Takeshi nodded.

"We *really* don't need a repeat of that," Bullet's wince was audible.

"Sensei, do you want to take command of this mission?" Charlie asked.

"Why?" Mr. Famous asked. "You've all proven capable. I'm certain that any of you is capable of handling this team and whatever's waiting in there just fine."

"Jan Ken Pow?" Takeshi shrugged.

"Charlie should take command," Gridman. exe interrupted to everyone's surprise. "If we get in there and he thinks someone else is better suited, he can hand over his PET."

"..."

"What?"

"Nothing," Kendoman. exe chuckled. "Just that you of all navis are the last we expected to speak in favor of teamwork, your design notwithstanding."

"Yeah, well..." Gridman. exe snorted. "I'm man enough to admit when I'm wrong."

"But only after being hit with a clue hard enough to leave a crater," Quint. exe quipped.

"Yeah, well, the helmet's not just for show," the sport-themed navi shot back with a snort. "Look, I've been a jerk since I came online, but... I can't lie to myself. You guys..."

Gridman. exe stood up, stepped forwards and held out his fist straight and proud towards the rest.

"You guys are the *best* team anyone could ask for."

Quint. exe's face split in a grin as Kendoman. exe threw his head back in a deep laugh and put his fist up to Gridman. exe's. It was swiftly joined by Enker. exe's, Ballade. exe's, Punk. exe's, and finally Gateman. exe's. When the last was sent a questioning glance, he simply pointed to the fully formed metal gateway that broke the static barrier to Nebula's controlled area.

"Who are we?" Gridman. exe asked.

"We are the bane of criminals everywhere!" Enker. exe, Quint. exe, Punk. exe, and Ballade. exe yelled.

"Who are we?!" Gridman. exe asked again, louder.

"We are the scourge of the underworld!" the four answered again, just as loudly, while Kendoman. exe and Gateman. exe exchanged a glance and shrugged.

"WHO ARE WE?!"

"We are the NetNavi Killers!" Kendoman. exe and Gateman. exe joined in this time.

"WHO ARE WE?!"

"WE ARE TEAM FAMOUS!"

"Well, well..." the HeelNavi chuckled as he saw a familiar face return. "Look who never learns... And what's this? Ha! You brought friends! Hey guys! He brought some friends!"

There was raucous laughter from the hundreds of DarkPower corrupted navis, all generic off-the-shelf varieties. All individually

weak, but possessing a grand mob mentality that would terrify the most hardened netbattler.

To them, a tall red-armored navi with blond hair flaring out like a cape, a smaller red navi with a long white ponytail and wearing shades, a pink girl navi with yellow antenna, a large crimson magnet navi, a yellow helicopter navi, and a purple hunk of spindly metal was hardly cause for alarm. Sure, many of them would fall, but they were so deep in the darkness they no longer cared. They just wanted to take someone with them, and they could certainly manage that much against such a rag-tag group.

"Napalmman, if you would please?" the red navi with the blond cape-hair said, prompting the spindly purple hunk of metal to clunk forwards, swinging its unwieldy arms to keep balance.

"Well, since you asked nicely..." the thing got to the front and squared itself, setting its arms like they were heavy weapons.

"Pfft!" the mob leader laughed. "You think you can take us on yourself? Bwahahahahahahaha!"

"Prepare to be blown away!" the purple navi yelled.

And then the explosions started, but the mob leader didn't change his mind. It was hard to do that when said mind was incinerated in the opening volley.

Hephaestus realized that he'd perhaps gotten used to Apollo's presence in his office for this venture when he turned to start berating the sun god for playing the 1812 overture, only to realize Apollo wasn't there and hadn't actually done that. He'd just imagined it.

"...I've been working too hard," he sighed to himself. "I should probably take advantage of some of that stockpiled vacation time

after this... Maybe take Pele up on her offer of a full Havaiki beach getaway..."

He idly wondered if Valkyries considered chainmail bikinis to be an insulting stereotype or standard beachwear. (53)

"Hah!" Napalmman. exe chuckled as the group strode through the devastation he'd left of the opposing army. "Those guys may have been weak, but that lit a fire in my heart! I hope there's stronger enemies ahead."

"That reminds me, who is our enemy anyway?" Gyroman. exe asked, turning to Zero. exe and Roll. exe. "Protoman said to ask you guys?"

"Yeah," the team's only female navi answered. "Chaud filled me and Mayl in on the situation when he called us in earlier. You see, this isn't just a liberation mission..."

"It's a rescue," Zero. exe finished.

"You mean...?" Magnetman. exe's eyes widened.

"Yeah," Lan spoke up across the connection. "Our opponent's the DarkSoul that's taken over my brother."

"Long story," Protoman. exe explained at Napalmman. exe's questioning look. "We'll fill you in on the details afterwards. But, yes, our opponent is none other than Megaman himself."

They crossed the threshold into the Dark Area, and all of them staggered from the sheer heat inside. It was like stepping into an active oven. If the net of End Area outside had been red from the heat that bled from Nebula's occupation, this place was an order of magnitude worse. Only instead of being red from the heat, the entire area seemed scorched like a fire had raged and burned out, leaving only its heat as a memory when all its fuel had been exhausted.

"The hell happened here?!" Gyroman. exe spun his rotors in a vain attempt to cool himself. Even the fire-element Napalmman. exe seemed unnerved by the heat of the place.

"Hell seems an apt description for a place such as this," the large magnetic member of the team noted.

"Well, well," a sinister and familiar voice echoed. "You're *early* . Are you that eager to enter a world of pain?"

"Megaman..." the only female member of the team's heart fell at the sound of her boyfriend's voice.

"We will save him," Zero. exe assured them all.

"Oh, and Lan, I hope you don't mind, but I changed a few things around," Dark Megaman grinned.

"What does he–?" Roll. exe started to ask.

"Doesn't matter right now," Protoman. exe interrupted.

"What matters is that we free this area and rescue our friend," Zero. exe gave the other sword-wielder an aside glance, and got a respectful nod in return. "Everyone knows what needs to be done."

"Heh..." Dark Megaman chuckled. "I wonder... which of you will be the first to taste my MegaBuster?"

"Napalmman," Zero. exe asked, "if you would?"

"You got it," the artillery navi nodded, locating the nearest DarkHole across the murk of tangible DarkPower infesting the area and taking aim. "Napalm!"

"Gateman!" Punk yelled out. "You got the key to that barrier yet?"

"Working on it!" Mr. Famous's oldest navi called back.

Team Famous had, to a member, gotten a great deal more nervous upon seeing just what navi was in charge of this area. Because, of course, out of all the myriad possibilties, *he* was the one jamming international communications and preventing coordinated retaliation by anti-Nebula forces.

"Hahahahaha!" the static laugh of Jammingman. exe boomed darkly. "Come on! You all should be happy! It's a Famous reunion all around! The overblown 'Elite Four', with some of Famous's own second-stringers tagging along, together again to fight the one foe they could only beat by a fluke!"

"Ignore the upstart!" Kendoman. exe snorted as he bashed a Guardian virus back into the DarkHole it had sprung from. "He was never a student! He has no claim to the legacy of Famous!"

"Oh, but my *friend* does," Jammingman. exe chuckled. "Don't you, Seijin?"

"Indeed, Jammingman," the unhinged chuckle of Famous's disgraced student was heard, causing all but one of Team Famous to freeze. "And it's time to show them what happens when they *don't* get lucky... Let's start with... How about this? TimeBomb1... TimeBomb2... TimeBomb3..."

"Program Advance..." the sinister static chuckle sounded out, declaring their doom. "GigaCountBomb... Nice knowing you all..."

"Aw, h–" Ballade. exe started in dismay, only for the one member of the team who didn't know the two at all to leap into action.

"Punt!" Gridman. exe kicked one of his exploding footballs high into the air where it whistled as it fell, before impacting at the site where the digital explosive had manifested and destroyed it before it could detonate properly.

"Good going, Gridman," Charlie commended the football navi. "Now, let–skkssssshhhhh...*

"Ah, ah, ah..." Seijin's voice taunted as their only connection to an operator vanished. "None of that now. Lets see how good you all are without the techniques you've spent years perfecting together. Let's see how well you get by when *your* best moves are sealed away. Oh, wait... that already happened to someone leagues better than you could *ever* be... He he he..."

"So, you actually made it this far without my help," Dark Megaman chuckled as he faced down the rest of Team Proto plus Zero. exe. "I'd be impressed if you hadn't taken so long to get here. Did I make things too hard, Lan?"

"Megaman, if you can hear me fight it!" Zero. exe stepped forwards, ignoring the taunt. "I know the real you remains alive within the darkness! You showed yourself once before, now do so again!"

Dark Megaman laughed in Zero. exe's face. "Oh, this is just too rich! What's my line again? I remember: 'You're wasting your breath! A DarkSoul inhabits this body now! If you want to defeat me, you'll have to delete the body too!' Does that sound about right?"

"..."

"Come on," Dark Megaman grinned. "Let me talk to Lan. I want to hear the emotional anguish he's going through having to fight me right now. I want to hear the doubt in his voice as he wonders how much of his precious brother is really left. I want to be able to tell him to his face that he's wasting his time. The future he's been fighting for has been rewritten. It now belongs to Nebula."

The answer he got was not the one he'd been expecting.

"Lan thought you might try something like this, so he handed off control to me," Chaud's voice stated. Dark Megaman was so surprised by the turn events had taken that he seemed to lose balance for a moment. "That's what happens when you know

someone as well as you do, they tend to know you just as well right back."

"Cute, Lan," Dark Megaman regained his bearing and smirked. "But it won't change anything, I–"

"Have access to all of Lan's most frequently used battlechips as a result of being a recently formed DarkSoul and are able to access the impressions their data has left on you at a whim," Chaud interrupted. "In addition to the usual DarkPower navis steeped in darkness, particularly those working with Nebula, possess. We aren't ignorant."

"So it seems," Dark Megaman growled, before smirking again. "And what do you have? The 'power of friendship'? The 'light of souls'? What could any of you have that I haven't seen and beaten before?"

"M-Cannon, MarkCannon3, TankCannon3, Megaman," Chaud declared stoically, the last chip's name causing Dark Megaman's eyes to widen in shock. "BattleChips in, Download."

"Program Advance," Protoman. exe got into a stance as an avatar of the uncorrupted Megaman. exe appeared next to him. "Double Hero."

Dark Megaman sneered as the two charged up and when they unleashed a barrage of buster shuts and sword waved at him, he began dancing between the projectiles, avoiding as many as it was possible to before unleashing a pair of AirHockey chips in retaliation that sent Protoman. exe reeling as the advance ended.

"I'm surprised Lan actually had the guts to give you that, Chaud," Dark Megaman chuckled, ignoring the injuries he'd sustained despite dodging the worst of the barrage as he and Protoman. exe began taking potshots at each other. "But I know how you fight almost as well as I know how Lan does. This changes nothing."

"Sorry, Chaud's not here anymore," the voice of Charlie Airstar sounded out, making the corrupted Megaman. exe stumble again. "But I'm sure we'll have a good time! Typhoon! Hurricane! Cyclone! BattleChips in! Download!"

Dark Megaman whipped around to face Gyroman. exe, not noticing that it was actually Napalmman. exe manifesting the chips from what was now right behind him.

"Time to blow you away!" the heavy artillery navi laughed right before he blasted Dark Megaman with the wind-based chips straight to the back.

"ARGH!" Dark Megaman roared out in fury, whipping around to take aim at Napalmman. exe. "Eat this! Bub–"

"Roll Arrow!" the shot hit Dark Megaman in the shoulder, cancelling his counterattack.

"Now!" Tesla's voice ordered, prompting the team's opponent to look around for her navi Magnetman. exe and miss the real threat.

"MagShock!" Roll. exe yelled as she teleported directly in front of Dark Megaman, hitting him point blank with the magnetic attack and locking him in place.

"How...?" Dark Megaman grunted. Only one PET could be used to connect through the DarkArea's effects at a time! How were they all doing this?! (54)

"Time to light it up!" Fyrefox's voice yelled. "BattleChips in! Download!"

"Bombs away!" Gyroman. exe cheered as he dropped a series of bomb chips on the immobile Dark Megaman the moment Roll. exe was clear.

"GAH!"

"Magnet Fire!" Magnetman. exe and Napalmman. exe yelled, the former using a MagnetBall to pin Dark Megaman down while the latter opened fire with his vulcan arm cannons. Gyroman. exe landed and opened up with his Tornado Arm to keep their opponent pinned.

"Crimson Crusade!" the voices of Protoman. exe and Zero. exe sounded while the corrupted Megaman. exe was still pinned down, the two charging and swinging their blades in rapid succession.

Dark Megaman cried out in pain as he was brought to the verge of deletion before his eyes pulsed crimson, his arm formed a sinister purple blade, and he swung for all he was worth.

"DARKSWORD!"

He swung in a full circle, hitting all of the navis around him. Only two managed to escape the full strike. Zero. exe took a lessened blow due to a last second dash by Protoman. exe that allowed Chaud's navi to shield him from the blow at the cost of losing his shield and taking the full hit himself. He was still partially injured as well as knocked down when Protoman. exe's injured form was flung back into him.

Roll. exe escaped unscathed due to being out of range, but from the look in Dark Megaman's eyes as he turned and charged at her, he meant to change that.

"DARK–"

The shining arrow from Roll. exe shattered the blade of darkness and she warped forwards to grab Dark Megaman's wrists and hold him fast. The antenna on her helmet then shot out and latched onto the sides of her opponent's.

"Heh..." Dark Megaman grinned. "Nice. I'm barely hanging on thanks to that UnderShot program Lan likes so much. Go on. Finish it. End your boyfriend forever."

"I'm connected," Roll. exe reported calmly. "Do it, Lan."

Dark Megaman's eyes widened again as he realized what Lan's plan had been the entire time. He was going to try the same thing Chaud had done to–

"Invisible, sacrifice for Unison Chip," Lan declared fiercely. "Unison chip in! Download! Bring my brother back!"

Dark Megaman's eyes closed in pain as the phantom indigo form of Shadowman. exe gathered around him and his DarkPower flared in response, the two incompatible powers warring with each other for dominance.

"L-Lan..."

"It's working!" Lan cheered. "It's work..."

He trailed off as the DarkPower emanating from Megaman. exe's body began doing something to the phantom form of Shadowman. exe. The indigo parts turned a yellowing beige, the long crimson scarf turned black...

...and Dark Megaman opened his blood-red eyes to glare at a shocked Roll. exe.

"...these connections..." Dark Megaman grinned past the pain, "work both ways..."

The DarkPower flared suddenly, breaking the half-formed DoubleSoul and crashing into Roll. exe who screamed.

The PET in Lan's hands suddenly sparked purple and a static bolt leapt to strike him in the chest, eliciting a scream of pain as he was flung several feet back.

"Lan!" Mayl yelled, rushing to his side in an instant, only to yank her hand back as a tiny bolt of purple static zapped at her. The rest of the team present saw that and decided to keep their distance.

"Ow..." Lan groaned. "Mayl...?"

"I'm here, Lan."

"Plan B..." Lan managed to groan out before more purple static wracked his body.

"But...?"

"No time," Chaud argued, grabbing for Lan's PET only to yank his hand back as he got zapped as well.

"Ha..." Dark Megaman's sinister chuckle was heard. "Ha ha ha ha ha..."

"M-Mayl...?" Roll. exe's pained voice sounded from the PET. "Help..."

Hearing her navi in pain cut through any self-doubt more effectively than anything else, and the next thing Mayl knew she was grabbing the PET despite the residual DarkPower sparking over it trying to zap her into dropping the device.

Dark Megaman grinned sadistically as he formed another DarkSword and staggered forwards. Who should he cut down first? The corporate lackey? The mercenary? The destroyer? Maybe the rival?

His gaze stayed locked on the form of Roll. exe as she writhed in pain from the DarkPower he'd slammed back across the connection she'd forged between him and Lan. No, he'd start with her.

Chuckling, he advanced slowly, partly from lingering injury and partly from wanting to savor the moment. Only to find a crimson form

standing in his way with a cape of yellow hair flaring dramatically behind it.

"I will not allow you to bring further harm to any of your comrades, Megaman," Zero. exe declared seriously as he ignited his Z-Saber. "You know this to be true."

"Well, then you'll have to delete me," Dark Megaman chuckled, raising his DarkSword. "There's no other way you'll ever stop me."

"How funny," Zero. exe remarked. "I seem to recall there was no other way of stopping me once. A virus that infected navis, only to become one itself. Far too dangerous to let live, regardless of what anyone felt on the matter."

Dark Megaman winced as he felt something stir within him and ruthlessly suppressed it.

"And yet here I am," the former virus stared down the newly minted darkloid, daring him to deny the parallel between their situations. "You can yet be saved, my friend. Until that happens, I can keep you busy. Without harming you if necessary."

"You'll fail," Dark Megaman swung his blade, and Zero. exe calmly caught it on his own, the two cyberblades locking together in a struggle of strength.

"We'll see."

"DarkThunder!" Seijin yelled out as the last DarkHole closed and the static barrier protecting Jammingman. exe went down. As he'd been doing ever since Seijin and Jammingman. exe had jammed Team Famous's connection to Charlie's PET, Gridman. exe formed his team clones and deliberately intercepted the attack.

"Charge!" Punk. exe yelled, turning into his spiked ball mode and rolling at Jammingman. exe, followed by the rest of the team. They

wanted to end this as fast as possible, before Seijin threw anything more dangerous at them.

"Perfect!" Seijin laughed. "BattleChips in! Download!"

"Program Advance!" Jammingman. exe was obscured as an avatar of Shademan. exe appeared before him. "BigNoise!"

"ARGH!" Punk. exe, along with the speedy Kendoman. exe fell as the giant wave of noise hit them all.

"That's more like it!" Seijin laughed. "DarkCannon!"

Enker. exe did his/her best to defend, but without Kalinka's operational assistance he/she simply could not form the MirrorBuster fast enough and he/she went down hard when the shot hit.

"Eat this, jerk!" Ballade. exe yelled, throwing an explosive. "Ballade Cracker!"

"Static Barrier! Static!"

The barrier negated the bomb while the tainted digital wind tore into Ballade. exe who screamed in pain.

"GateCannon!" the shot finally did damage to Jammingman. exe, and he turned his attention to the remainder of his opponents.

Sunayama sat in the prison's media room, holding the SubPET that had been delivered recently. He wasn't exactly sure how long, and it didn't seem to matter. The SubPET had limited functionality, and if he wanted to actually use the Net, he had to use one of the prison's navis assigned for prisoner use.

But he didn't. None of that mattered to him. Just the precious contents of the SubPET in his hands, showing a small patch of

sandy brown that would look like a worthless blob to anyone else, but was infinitely precious to him.

How long had it been since he'd lost his partner? Since he'd used those strange upgrades Lord Wily had 'procured' from questionable sources? Since...

When that Tesla woman had showed him the SubPET he currently held and told him what it contained, he'd nearly broken down right then and there. He'd sold to her soon after. He'd have sold a hundred times over for what she'd given him back. He just...

"Su... na... ya... ma...?" the slow, barely coherent voice sounded from the SubPET.

Tears streaked down Sunayama's face as he wished he knew who exactly was responsible for this. Whoever they were...

...they were a miracle worker.

Mayl did her best to tune out the sound of clashing blades between Zero. exe and Megaman. exe's DarkSoul, keep her grip on Lan's PET despite the apparent DarkPower sparks racing over it trying to shock her into letting it go, and focus on her navi. Her navi who was in pain after taking the full brunt of the DarkPower surge that had floored Lan and infected his PET.

She recalled the few lessons Andou and Stargirl. exe had given them regarding the Way of the Miko in between archery lessons and focus exercises. She hadn't gotten far, but what she had managed seemed familiar to her somehow.

She remembered watching Chaud go through something similar when his navi had been infected during the Blue Moon tournament. How he'd synched with Protoman. exe to snap him out of the early stages.

Taking a deep breath, she held on despite the pain and focused on her connection to Roll. exe. Focused, and pushed her feelings through the corrupting darkness and into her navi. There seemed to be a moment of resistance, and then the familiar sensation of full synchro being achieved amidst a complete absence of the sparks of DarkPower from before.

"Roll?"

"Feeling like myself again, Mayl!"

"That's good. Ready to go save Megaman?"

"Of course!"

"Okay, we need to time this just right..."

Not noticing the stares from her teammates as they helped Lan sit up, Mayl began selecting chips as Roll. exe waited to join the fray.

"Why are you so set on doing the impossible?" Dark Megaman growled as his DarkSword clashed against Zero. exe's Z-Saber. "Megaman's mind has been claimed by the DarkPower! There is no turning back! *I* am the one and only Megaman!"

"Fool," Zero. exe scoffed as the two combatants pushed off from each other. "You know not the power of his soul. He was able to save me once from a situation yet more hopeless than what he is in and now I shall return the favor!"

"That'll be hard to do when I kill you!" Dark Megaman sneered as he used data for a Recover300 chip and followed it with a series of AirShots that pushed Zero. exe back before forming a darkly glowing cannon.

"Battle Chip in!" Mayl yelled suddenly from her end. "Download! Static!" (55)

"Wha–?" Dark Megaman paused in surprise, preventing him from dodging as Zero. exe blasted him with the tainted digital wind, causing his form to waver.

"Now!" Zero. exe yelled as he slashed with his Z-Saber, knocking Dark Megaman off-balance.

"HolyPanel! Barrier! Repair! Program Advance!" came the voice of Mayl as Roll. exe appeared directly in front of Dark Megaman. "LifeSaver!"

"GAAAHHHH!" Dark Megaman cried out as Roll's protective program advance was used in a manner never intended and attempted to purge him of the dark power corrupting him.

"Did it work?" Roll. exe asked as their opponent slumped over, his darkened body flickering to the brighter colors of his real self intermittently.

"T-that..." the flickering form choked out, and then began laughing. "That... all?"

"It didn't work," Roll. exe backed up as Dark Megaman got to his feet. "He's still in Nebula's clutches..."

"Don't count him out yet," Zero. exe admonished, taking a ready stance. "He's stronger than any of us know."

"This... is the end!" Dark Megaman activated a cannon style chip. "DarkCann–AGH!?"

"L-Lan..." the voice of Hub, the untainted mind trapped in the darkness, struggled to make itself heard. "Ev...eryone... I-I won't... give in... As long... as I know... you haven't... given up... I won't give in... to the DarkPower...!"

"...Tsk!" Dark Megaman sneered as he took control once more, the DarkPower within him flaring like a bonfire. "Stay down where you

belong! This body belongs–"

"–TO ME!" Hub yelled as the DarkPower around him burst like a bubble, leaving him to collapse into unconsciousness. But not before his soul resonated with the navi who had led the rescue effort. (56)

Seijin Yami growled as he kept up the assault with Jammingman. exe. Why wouldn't they just *die* already?! Any idiot could see that he had every advantage! He had the better navi, who was attuned to the environment, he had the superior operating skills (even when he hadn't disabled his opponents' operators), and he had the best chips! He was the only one who could use them thanks to the special trap he and Jammingman. exe had put together!

So why were these second-raters so bound and determined to keep coming?!

"Death Touchdown!" the football-themed navi yelled as he bum-rushed Jammingman. exe.

"Why are you so set on fighting a losing battle!" Seijin yelled as he directed Jammingman. exe to fire on the advancing navi, who just kept coming no matter the hits he took. Several of which should by all rights have forced him to abort the attack from sheer force of impact.

"Because!" the navi yelled as he hit Jammingman. exe's location, and caused the whole area to detonate and carve a large chunk out of Jammingman. exe's health.

"Gah! Get off of me!"

When the smoke cleared, Seijin saw the football navi grappling with Jammingman. exe and started searching for some good close range chips to force him off.

"Because when I listen to you, I hear myself and it makes me want to puke!" the football navi yelled.

" *What?!* " Seijin abandoned his search to sputter indignantly.

"All this 'I'm the best', 'I can do anything', and 'I don't need a team' crap I hear out of your mouth? That was me not even a month ago! I was so bad Famous had to go find someone to kick my ass and knock some sense into me!"

"YOU ARE NOTHING LIKE ME!" Seijin roared. "I'M THE DARK PRODIGY SEIJIN YAMI! YOU ARE NOTHING BUT ONE OF FAMOUS'S STUPID TINKER-TOY REJECTS THAT HE MAKES OUT OF BOREDOM!"

"Seijin! I need a chip!" Jammingman. exe called out in worry, but Seijin was too incensed by the football navi grappling with him to hear his navi's words.

"Yeah, and in another life I'd have probably been your navi," the sports-themed navi snorted. "We'd have been quite an all-star pair, I think... Too bad you never really learned how to play on a team. Do it guys!"

"GATECANNON!"

"BALLADECRACKER!"

"MADROLLER!"

"BARRIERSPEAR!"

"TRAINING!"

"SAKUGARNE! IMPACT!"

Seijin was halfway through realizing what was going on when his PET screen dissolved into static.

"No... Not again... I... I can't have lost *again* ..."

He had to get out of here. If the Officials found him, he'd be arrested and go back to prison. He was never going back to prison if he could help it. If Nebula, the guys who had broken him out and revived Jammingman. exe, found him...

Well, prison would probably seem like a much better option at that point.

He scrambled to grab all the equipment he could carry and ran to the door, flung it open–

–and ran face-first into Bullet Baret's fist.

Dr. Regal sat in his office pondering the things he'd verified. Megaman. exe's escape from the DarkPower he'd been ensnared with was... unfortunate, but... not unexpected. Not after what he'd learned. The master of Nebula had, however, managed to grill Dark Megaman over some of the things he'd come to suspect since the incident with Duo.

He'd heard about their uncanny ability to prepare for scenarios despite having no possible way to know about them beforehand. WWW, Gospel, his early Darkloids, and even Duo had all fallen before their uncanny foreknowledge. And so he'd arranged to have them bugged and he'd heard some rather unbelievable things.

But with Dark Megaman's volunteered information pulled from the navi's own mind, he had to admit the likely truth. Lan and his navi had traveled back in time through some mysterious manner. They possessed foreknowledge because they had lived through the events before. And they had vocally anticipated events that could only come after his and Nebula's defeat.

Well, they'd learn. With even the slivers he'd gleaned, he could change the game considerably. But of course, for him to pull it off

properly no one else could know. Not his underlings in Nebula, not his Darkloids, not even Cosmoman. exe.

But the world would find out soon enough...

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1) Poll time! How many of you want to strangle me for teasing a big reveal and then yanking it away like that?

2) That Interrupt chip? Looks like Chaud kept a couple of things from the incident with Junkman. exe.

3) Reydrago: I think the train been on fire for awhile, young hero.

4) I tried to resist the pun, but it was snow use.

5) I tried to resist the pun but… wait a sec...

6) Or at least not completely guilty.

7) She means the communication disruption at the end of Battle Network 4, not a previous Loop.

8) Ms. Millions is kind of a creepy lady given the way she pretty much hits on Lan when they meet in BN2. That said, fighting Nebula sounds like something she'd go for.

9) Ah, Masa's (Sharkman. exe's operator) not-so-secret identity in the anime. Misteriyu is Miyu (Skullman. exe's operator) and Black Rose is Sal (Woodman. exe's operator).

10) Anyone else remember that little stage show in BN3 when you went to fight Mistman. exe or Bowlman. exe? In any case, the Net Rangers (here representing all five generic navi types in the series):

Net Red: Paulie and Jammer (as a GuardNavi recolored red)

Net Blue: 'Cyber Sage' Koetsu, named in-series for one of the main game programmers Koetsu Matsuda, and his blue male FaceNavi

(rather than the NormalNavi he was shown with in Battle Chip Challenge), named Honami in the last Battle Network Activation installment.

Net Green: Flave and his NormalNavi Orr

Net Yellow: Yuko and Ponta (as a female FaceNavi), back from the dead again for funsies

Net Black: Tetsu and his HeelNavi Bo

11) Cows are Apollo's sacred animal. At least he had a herd of them and cursed Odysseus's men when they slaughtered one for food.

12) Glide. exe politely pretended he didn't hear anything.

13) Because the game's animators were lazy and didn't make movement sprites for the four in their swimsuits.

14) Now there's an understatement...

15) The whole 'trapped with giant drill coming down from above' thing makes this a scary-ass scenario, let me tell you. Now, whether it's scarier with Pride, whose navi is completely out of her control, or Tesla, who *doesn't seem to care in the first place* , is up for debate.

16) Admit it, you were wondering this when she showed up in the tournament.

17) Well, you see Dex, there's this whole 'sworn to secrecy' thing and... right, you can't hear me...

18) Clearly, he got better.

19) For all that she becomes an ally in the game, Tesla is amazingly petty to begin with.

20) The second part of this line (after the 'umm...') by burningclaw2. Also, if you don't know what a cat fight is, it refers to two girls/women

(stereotypically attractive) in a knock-down, drag-out, hair-pulling, nail-scratching, clothes-ripping brawl. Males stereotypically prefer to stand back and enjoy the show since the other option is trying to break it up and likely becoming the target of both violent females.

21) Lan Down!

22) Okay, Lan... in light of your injury, I'll forgive the incredibly lame pun.

23) Conveniently ignoring the fact that he and his favored prophets were some of the most frequent offenders.

24) I'm not kidding. The difference between her personality before joining the team and after is so stark and sudden that I can't help but wonder if she's got some psychological disorder...

25) Once More Unto The Beach.

26) Having commandeered Mayl's shirt which, while still a few sizes small on her, was a better fit than any of Yai's spare clothes.

27) The 'legendary fist navi' is the guy whose image is on the BronzeFist, SilverFist, and GoldFist chips. If any of you readers knows who the heck (if anyone) that's supposed to be a reference to, I'd love to know.

28) A character in the anime named Andou Romeda became the temporary operator of Starman. exe. Though she was a fortune teller, not a shinto priestess... Odd, that...

29) Poor Windman. exe...

30) Not to mention the happy dance his mother was doing upon seeing how he and Mayl kept blushing and trying to pretend they weren't looking at each other. No one really held that against Mrs. Hikari considering that she needed all the positive thinking she could get with her husband's whereabouts still unknown.

31) Hub would have thought it a sign of the apocalypse if Nebula hadn't already gained an iron grip on the world. As it was, he'd snuck off to the message boards a couple of nights to see if anyone had spotted Duo. exe's comet returning a few centuries earlier than scheduled.

32) He totally meant to fall off his seat as he did so. Brilliant tactic to catch his possible assailant off guard. At least that was his story and he was sticking to it.

33) Pardon me for a moment. I need to hit myself for making this pun.

34) Suddenly, football.

35) The last couple of lines of this part by GammaTron. The unmentionable is another of Hephaestus's dirty socks. Shame on you if you thought otherwise.

36) You've already guessed who this is, haven't you?

37) Wait, was Gridman. exe modeled after Charlie Brown now?

38) This is another ninja technique not unique to Naruto's universe. I apologize if you think that should be obvious, but I've sadly learned otherwise.

39) Chaud acquired the chip to train the Muramasa Style, but rumor has it that the one Shadowman. exe holds is the original program that the chip is styled after.

40) Why, yes, I am implying exactly what it sounds like.

41) Lyrics from Africa by Toto.

42) The description is basically the WaterGodComp's appearance in BN4's overworld.

43) Because of how I like to call the PC Wave Man 'Water Man' (from Mega Man 3 for the PC), this means Waterman. exe is a navi counterpart to one of the PC Robot Masters.

44) Hmm... Getting Lan back in the game after losing Hub... Door #1, Chaud and Protoman. exe... Door #2, Baryl and Colonel. exe... Hmm...

Let's see what's behind door #3.

45) Finally! The reveal you've all been waiting for! (And some of you had likely already guessed)

46) Eep.

47) *blinks* Umm... what exactly did we just walk in on?

48) Sunna wasn't exactly thrilled either.

49) Whaddya know, they have an official name after all according to this scene... Though you'd miss it if you blinked during the appearance of that one line of text. Looks like I'm going to have to go back to the previous chapter and change it from OfficialNavis at some point.

50) I bet you were all wondering what happened to him after he lost to Mayl, right? *crickets chirp* Yeah... didn't think so...

51) Yep, that's right. The captain's navi is Waveman. exe.

52) No, not Airstar. I only *just* realized that we have two Charlies to keep track of... This is why the One Steve Limit exists. Except there's no Steves that I have to deal with. Just Charlies.

53) I think the Mega Man: Inside Out Loop implies the answer to this question towards the end.

54) Hot potato.

55) Static is part of a set of chips sometimes referred to as 'Evil Chips' that require the user to be a 'denizen of the darkness' to utilize (which includes DarkSoul navis), or to possess a workaround such as the DarkLicense program or having a DarkHole open on their side of the field. Zero. exe would count as a natural denizen due to his status as a viral navi, even though, like Serenade. exe, he's not actually evil.

Dark Megaman's surprise is because that group of chips was about the *last* thing he expected any of his opponents to be to be using.

56) Yes, that's right. ZeroSoul. *I went there.*

Next time: ...this is War.

Happy New Year From The Yggdrasil Admins

Happy New Year from the Admins of Yggdrasil

AdminSpace.1

Dionysus whistled to himself as he approached the cafeteria. Yggdrasil might be in a right state and everyone was running around in a panic, but that was no reason not to take time to appreciate the finer things in life, like good wine and good foo–

The god of wine stopped as he beheld the sight in the Admin cafeteria and backed up out of the doorway before taking a quick swig of his current bottle. Nope, just wine. Which probably meant he was really seeing that.

"Oy! Get out of the doorway!" some Afrikans deity whose name he couldn't remember yelled at him. "What's so blasted interesting you Olympian drunkard?"

"There's some sort of flying spaghetti monster in the cafeteria," Dionysus replied, continuing to stare, but stepping back a bit further to clear the doorway.

"Uh-huh..." the other Admin rolled his eyes and strode past in a huff, glaring at the open wine bottle in the wine god's hand. "How much of that stuff have you had today, you–GAH!"

The Afrikans deity scrambled backwards in shocked panic.

"THAT THING JUST TOUCHED ME WITH ITS NOODLY APPENDAGE! WHAT IS IT DOING IN THERE ANYWAY?!"

Dionysus squinted. It looked like the creature was making something. In fact... "It looks like it's making a beer volcano..."

After a few moments to process that, Dionysus decided he could get to like this bizarre being and strode into the cafeteria.

AdminSpace.2

"I'm honestly surprised you even know how to use a terminal, much less do something that complex with it..."

"I picked up a *few* things from my unwashed oaf of a husband," Aphrodite sniffed in disdain. "Really, he would *never* shut up about his precious work..."

"Even when you were trying to seduce him?"

" *Please* ," the goddess of love scoffed, "I would never waste my talents on the likes of *him* ."

AdminSpace.3

Nut giggled like a blushing schoolgirl at what was being said on the other end of her office line. "Oh, darling, you have the naughtiest mind!"

"..."

"Geb!" Nut's starry night-sky form blushed like a supernova going off. "I know we have catching up to do, but *I'm* at least too out of practice to do the *entire* divine sutra in one sitting!"

"..."

"Oh, honey! I'd never suggest... I'm sorry... It's just... we haven't seen each other in so long that even I've been tempted a few times and..."

"..."

"No, I'd never go through with it either... *sigh* One of these days Ra is going to screw up micromanaging our schedules and we'll be able to get together for some fun... Maybe make another honeymoon out of it... *mmmmm*"

"..."

"Really? Pele offered... hold on a moment honeybun... I've got something going on here I don't think is supposed to exist in this particular Loop iteration. I'll have to call you back, Geb dear. Love, kisses, and a raincheck on everything else! *mwah!*"

click

"Okay, let's see what's going on and... Oh please don't tell me that damn sociopathic magical girl mascot looped in and I missed it..."

AdminSpace.4

Fenrir looked up at his blind date and fought back a groan.

She was beautiful (for a goddess who preferred a human-like form, but then Fenrir was the son of a shapeshifter so he was less hung up on that than most), sure. She was also dressed in a pure white toga overlayed with blue armor that highlighted her form and with a bright red cape draped over her shoulders. A red cape with a hood draped over her golden sunburst crown.

"Do you have any idea how many bad jokes that outfit will invite?" he rubbed his face with his paws.

"Well," the goddess smiled slightly, revealing that she seemed to find the situation rather more humorous than Fenrir did, "I *did* prepare for a night out with the biggest, baddest wolf in the heavens..."

Fenrir lost his fight against the groan, prompting the goddess Marianne Liberty to giggle like a chorus of bells.

(EvilhHumour)

A couple of tables away, sat three beings.

"Mom, this didn't work with us so *why* do you think it will work for Fenrir?"

"Shush boy, I'm making sure your brother's date goes good." The masculine voice muttered, peeking over his menu.

"Remind me again why a shapeshifter, and two *horse* gods, are using these plastic glasses as a disguise?" The only female at the table asked while still wearing them.

"Because mom likes Groucho Marx and-"

"Shush boy or I will show Epona your baby pictures!" The father snapped, leaning up in his chair.

"Mom, *please* don't get us kicked out of another restaurant!"

AdminSpace.5 (Arcticx-Frost)

"AHAHAHAHAH!"

The somewhat manic laughter continued for somewhere close to three minutes before tapering off into wheezes. Ares looked up from where he had slumped on the floor to catch his breath to the complete silence of the office.

"I DID IT! He finally fucking did it. It has taken..." The god paused to look at the feed on his terminal for a few moments. "three hundred sixty-seven trillion, six hundred ninety-two billion, five hundred fifty-

six million, one hundred sixty-nine thousand, five hundred forty-five attempts. The Kid has finally completed a single baseline loop. I-"

A beeping from his terminal made him pause, as well as make his eyelid twitch with stress.

"WHAT!" Grabbing the screen from it's stand, Ares' face gaped at the bloody smear sitting under the 'Thanks for playing' sign.

ATTEMPT FAILED

Not one of the other Admins would admit it, but most of them thought that smashing the screen and crying in the corner was a valid response to the situation.

AdminSpace.6 (dragonraptyr)

Masakado stared at the cat who was currently sitting on his terminal. The Tokyo god blinked, trying to figure out what had just happened. For her part, the cat looked as eager to please as any feline could. She gave a short bow, and smiled up at him. "Hi, I'm new!"

Masakado gave a sigh. "I'm not sure I even want to know anymore." He stuck his head into the hallway. "Can someone tell Skuld that a cat from the Hub is now a Shinto deity? My brain is broken."

AdminSpace.7 (EvilhHumour and me)

Jormungandr looked at his brothers and their dates as they ran from the restaurant, angry shouts behind them.

"Say, why hasn't dad done this to Hel yet?" He asked as they turned the corner, with Marianne holding on tight with her legs around Fenrir's neck and one hand to her red hood.

"Are you kidding?" his other brother said, ducking the thrown pasta. "Mom's little girl? As far as a Loki as concerned, Hel's not going able to date for a few more iterations!"

"Less chatting girls, more fleeing!" Epona giggled as they ran through a park.

Off to the side, a goddess whose appearance had far more in common with a mortal named Harvey Dent (aka Two-Face) than most females would like overheard the comment as her brothers and their dates tore past and sighed heavily.

"I've had a boyfriend for eons," Hel muttered indignantly to herself. "It's not my fault that none of you believe Baldur actually likes me..."

"Loki is simply not ready for his little girl to grow up," a man held out a bouquet of roses, beaming a smile at her. "Shall we go scare the old man, my dear?" Baldur held a hand out for his beautiful girlfriend, grin growing as she accepted it.

AdminSpace.8 - A Former Lover Part 1

Aglaea; goddess of grace and splendor second class, daughter of Zeus by Eurynome, one of the attendants/interns assigned to Aphrodite, and thus one of the people who actually did the first class love goddess's paperwork; rushed down the hall clutching a folder to her ample chest and trying hard not to blush. She'd done her best not to sound too eager for the simple messenger assignment, but she was certain her mistress/boss had seen right through her.

But she'd been given the job anyway, which just about had her on cloud nine. It had been so long since she'd seen him after all. Since before the Event and the subsequent emergency activation of the Loop protocols. She...

...She wondered if he even remembered her, really. Sure, they'd been lovers for a long while, lived together, had four of the loveliest, most amazing daughters together, but... It had been a long time since her mistress/boss had forbidden her to see him. A very long time indeed. Technically, she was still forbidden, she supposed. But she was also on a direct message errand to his office, so it certainly wouldn't be *her* fault if they just... bumped into each other... or she tripped and fell into his strong arms... or they both fell to the floor and...

She shook her head of that train of thought. Deliver the message first. Then see if he still felt... anything... for her. After that, she supposed whatever happened, happened.

Stopping, she realized that she'd overshot her destination and backtracked a bit before knocking.

"It's open," a strong female voice responded.

Aglaea froze at the sound of a woman's voice. Had he moved on? Found another lover? It wasn't like she'd been his first after all. Or even his only while they were together. There was even that time they'd had a bit too much of Dionysus's wine and woken up in bed with that goddess from–

"I swear, if this is another knock-and-ditch I am going to find out who's responsible and break their knuckles," the voice from before interrupted Aglaea's thoughts.

Taking a deep breath to prepare herself, Aglaea clutched the message tighter to her chest and opened the door.

"Oh, good," the woman behind the desk in the outer office said as she stepped in, "I don't have to break any knuckles this time."

Aglaea stopped and stared at the other woman. She was gorgeous. Not as gorgeous as Aglaea's mistress/boss (by said goddess of beauty's repeated insistence), but she was shapely, reasonably

endowed, and very much in shape. She wasn't what Aglaea's mistress/boss denounced as 'horridly butch', but had well-defined muscles that could clearly back up her threat of breaking knuckles while accentuating her femininity. The woman was also wearing what looked like a business suit made out of chainmail. One that hugged her figure so close it emphasized every feminine curve. Along with her nordic appearance, it was clear this woman was a Valkyrie.

"Well?" the Valkyrie asked.

"I... I have a message for H-Hephaestus?" Aglaea barely managed to not squeak. She completely failed to not blush.

"Oh, come in," the Valkyrie waved in exasperation. "I'm not going to bite."

"Plus the door's kind of in my way," a second voice came from behind the open door.

Aglaea jumped several inches on hearing a second woman's voice. Still, she hurried in and shut the door, seeing another Valkyrie behind it. This one in what appeared to be a skintight metal mesh bodysuit. Next to her lay a set of boots, gauntlets, and helmet within arm's reach. She also had her eyes closed and seemed to be resting.

"Thank you," the second Valkyrie said without even opening her eyes.

"Y-you're welcome..." Aglaea stuttered nervously. This one was just as beautiful as the other!

"You said you had a message?" the Valkyrie behind the desk, Herfjötur if she was reading the nameplate right, reminded her.

"Y-yes!" Aglaea fumbled with the missive a bit before holding it out to the Valkyrie. "Lady Aphrodite se–"

"File thirteen," Herfjötur pointed to the side of her desk. Aglaea blinked and looked, but saw nothing except a wastebasket.

"Um..." Aglaea fidgeted a bit. This wasn't going how she'd hoped it would. "Don't you want to read what it says?"

"Is it offers for divine beauty treatments," Herfjötur began ticking off her fingers, "a great deal on a vacation in that poor excuse for a romantic comedy setting she runs, an ad for a cheap dating service for unattached goddesses, a complaint about Hephaestus, or yet another reminder that Heph hasn't set up a fused Loop with aforementioned poor excuse for a romantic comedy setting in a while?"

"Er..." Aglaea pulled the message back and skimmed it. "The last one?"

"Right," Herfjötur nodded towards the wastebasket again. "Please tell Aphrodite that we 'appreciate' her concern, but that Hephaestus is perfectly happy using the Satellite of Love as his go-to Safe-Mode Loop. And even if it's not available, he's brokered arrangements with the Admins who run a number of others so there is little chance he will need to make use of Aphrodite's any time for the foreseeable future."

"Oh... Right." Aglaea drooped at the realization. That was it, then. She'd failed her assignment which meant that she'd never be sent back here with anything ever again. Never get to see him again. Never have a chance to–

"Hey now," the other Valkyrie was suddenly at Aglaea's side, "surely it can't be that bad, can it?"

Aglaea sniffed pitifully and realized that she'd begun crying right there in Hephaestus's office. In front of two gorgeous Valkyries that were probably his latest lovers and were so much better than she was and–

"I'm a failure..." Aglaea sobbed. "I can't even deliver a message properly and now Lady Aphrodite won't ever have any reason to send me over because she'll know I'll fail and I won't ever get to see him again and I'll never get to tell him how sorry I am about what happened the last time we saw each other..."

"Come on, sit down," the other Valkyrie firmly directed her over to a chair and just as firmly made her sit in it.

"Now..." Herfjötur commanded as she pulled over two more chairs for herself and the other Valkyrie to sit in, both facing Aglaea as she broke down in front of them, "tell us what this is all about..."

Aglaea sniffed and looked at the two warrior Aesir. They seemed concerned, genuinely concerned rather than what Lady Aphrodite often showed in its place, but also stern. Protective. Of Hephaestus. In case whatever this was might hurt him.

"Okay..." Aglaea wiped away her tears as best she could. "It all started way back when..."

AdminSpace.9 (Evilhumour and Firehawk242)

Bast held Tama close to her, glaring at the wolf Admin. "Fenrir, I am shocked at you! How could you?!"

"She was in my plate! How was I supposed to know she was the new Admin everyone is talking about!?" Fenrir looked at the cat again, licking his lips before a newspaper descended onto his nose.

Fand drifted over to observe the new Admin on a flutter of wings. "Oh how adorable!"

"Hi, my name's Tama," the cat said.

"Do you have a boyfriend Tama?" Fand asked.

"Uh, no..." Tama said, confused.

"Eeeee!" Fand squealed with delight. "I'll go put together a list of possible choices right away!" She flew off fast enough to blow loose papers around in her wake.

"She's always like this," Madoka said, passing by with an armful of paperwork.

AdminSpace.10 (Vadrigar)

Gordon was looking at the small cat that had suddenly appeared in the tram on the way to Sector C, and was very confused. Then it started to talk.

"Hi! My name is Tama! I'm your new Admin, nice to meet you!"

For the first time in decades, Gordon was absolutely speechless.

"Ah jeez, I'm running la-oh god, oh god what was that?"

All he remembered was seeing a talking cat in the tram last loop, then everything going black. Then, he turned around to see the same cat in the same spot, still seemingly happy as ever.

"Hi! I don't know if you remember, but when you saw me last loop, you didn't talk for a while, then just passed out. A little while later some bad guys came and shot you. But don't worry, I reset the loop and everything will be super!"

Gordon didn't remain speechless this time.

"WHAT IN THE FU–"

AdminSpace.11 (Evilhumour)

"Do you mind getting off my head?" Fenrir grunted as he walked towards the fridge.

"But I'm so high up here and your head is so comfy!" The cat giggled, watching the wolf opened the fridge to reveal a mewling paperbag. "Aww, Fenrir you got me some playmates!"

Fenrir's stomach fell as he watched Tama play with his lunch, but he chuckled as he stole Zeus's lunch, watching the new Admin play with her friends on the kitchen table in front of him.

AdminSpace.12 (Varigar, with additions by me)

"ZEUS!"

The god of thunder was startled into consciousness after a "brief" nap, with a very angry Skuld glaring at him and tapping her foot.

"Wha, what, what? What is it?"

"Why, WHY, in the name of Yggdrasil did you tell the new Admin she was assigned to the Half Life loops?!"

"I did? OH, that. Well that loop's needed an official Admin for a while, and it was stable enough as it was, so I figured she wouldn't have too much trouble!"

"Tama has the mind of a CHILD, you blithering moron! How could you make her have to look after THAT man?! He'll drive her insane faster than you can say-"

"Oh, hello!"

Both Skuld and Zeus jumped at the small sound, looking around to see a small cat on the floor near them.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to startle you. Anyway, I thought I should let you both know that I managed to stabilize the Half Life loops enough that they're going through an expansion! I'm so happy! Gordon will be so excited when I tell him!"

The cat wandered off, and Skuld didn't dare turn around, for she knew all she would see was Zeus' grinning mug.

" *Regardless* of apparent success due to sheer dumb luck," Skuld ground out, "she needs *training* before starting as an Admin. Find her some."

"Sure," the head of the Olympians shrugged nonchalantly as the youngest norn went off to find something to relieve her apparent headache.

Had she been thinking clearly, she might have wondered what Zeus was up to that he'd agree so easily.

AdminSpace.13

"Oh for the love of..." Hephaestus sighed as he read the memo and looked over his latest assignment. He'd been given another student. Recent Ascension straight from the Hub, textbook postmortem faith and emotion deification which was much smoother than a straight power Ascension. Plus she hadn't been a looper, meaning nothing important had been relying on her for support. All it meant was paperwork.

"You're mad, aren't you?" the new feline deity laid her ears back and lowered herself warily. "I'm sorry... The bearded storm man said it was okay and he told me to come here even though that place with

the Gordon guy is going just fine and..." She was also rambling... and making sad kitten eyes that–

"OH MY GOSH YOU'RE *ADORABLE* !"

And Hephaestus's Valkyrie parole officers/assistants had just spotted her.

"I love your fur!" Herfjötur squealed.

"It's so soft!" Eir agreed.

"Scratchies!" Brynhildr scratched the confused feline goddess behind the ears. She seemed to like it.

Hephaestus sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose. Valkyries didn't normally do such things, but... Well, the feline goddess was adorable. His wife would have probably declared the cat goddess a mangy beast and insisted that the distraction from her so-called 'divine form' be removed posthaste. "Ladies... *please* stop crowding my newest student..."

"Wait," the feline's ear perked up, "you'll really teach me Hephaestus-sensei?"

"As opposed to fighting this and risking you being reassigned to someone who has to call tech support just to find the 'on' button? Yes."

"She wouldn't really be reassigned to someo–"

"My father signed off on this."

"...Yeah, good call."

The calico feline looked back and forth in confusion, not really comprehending that Zeus would happily reassign her to apprentice under an Admin who barely knew what they were doing just to spite

Hephaestus should he refuse the latest addition to his already overworked schedule.

Hephaestus just looked over the paperwork.

Name: Tama.

Gender: Female.

Pantheon: Shinto Kami.

Former Race: Mortal housecat (Calico).

Native reality: The Hub.

Previous Occupation: Ultra-Stationmaster (Kishi Rail Station), Vice President (Wakayama Electric Railway), Honourable Eternal Stationmaster (Posthumous Promotion).

Hephaestus blinked at the occupation list. Hmm...

"Um... Hephaestus-sensei?" Tama asked hesitantly.

"I see you have an affinity for trains," Hephaestus noted.

"Um... yeah... I love trains!"

"Well, one of my assigned branches is rather stable all things considered," he mused. "Never gives me any trouble, which unfortunately means that it gets frequently neglected in favor of those that do. You shall run it as part of your internship and, if I am satisfied with your progress at the end of your lessons, then I shall oversee its permanent transfer to you."

"R-really? Um... what kind of place is it?"

"Talking trains," Hephaestus replied and barely suppressed a chuckle at the way Tama's eyes lit up.

AdminSpace.14 (Leviticus Wilkes)

Skuld walked into Madoka's cubicle, a fire in her eyes. She hadn't received Madoka's progress update on her work that day, and if Madoka didn't have a good reason, she'd... Get a stern talking to.

Skuld wouldn't yell at her: even she had standards.

Madoka was sitting there when Skuld arrived, and all questions were answered with a simple point to her head. Nestled neatly in her hair was Tama, snoozing gently.

Skuld took one look, deigned to wake Tama up, said nothing, and left the room. A god cat sleeping on your head was a good reason for procrastination, after all.

AdminSpace.8 - A Former Lover Part 2

Madoka was a number of things. A magical girl, a former Anchor, a recently Ascended goddess (undetermined influence, probationary class), one of Hephaestus's protégés, and an adopted member of the forge god's eclectic group of children. At the moment she had been dragged from her duties by four of his daughters, who had introduced themselves as the (younger) Charites, so they could give her a makeover.

They had been very insistent about that.

They were also filling Madoka in on a lot of their family history that she hadn't yet been introduced to.

"Okay," Madoka stated after Eucleia had finished applying the lipstick, "so I know Eros is the son of Aphrodite and Ares, but he was foisted off on Hephaestus to raise..."

"Because 'auntie' freaked out over the possibility of raising a kid and Ares refused to have anything to do with a 'namby-pamby love god'," Eupheme nodded from where she was doing Madoka's nails.

"Pandora was created by Hephaestus and Athena from clay as a mortal," Madoka continued, determined to keep this all straight, "but they strong-armed a petition for her Ascension when they learned she was meant as a scapegoat for the other Olympians."

"You don't mess with Pandora when either of them are in earshot," Euthenia giggled as she double-checked Madoka's measurements while sewing a garment. "Or if they might learn about it later."

"Thalia is... only half Olympian?" Madoka had been a bit distracted by the way Euthenia was measuring her chest when the nymph's mother, a goddess from another pantheon, was named and didn't want to admit it.

"She inherited her mother's exotic skin tone, too," Philophrosyne grinned as she continued styling Madoka's hair. "Caught Zeus's eye in fact."

"Okay, I know that Admins don't really have that issue like mortals do, but isn't she still his granddaughter?"

"Well, yeah," Eupheme agreed. "That's how she figured out how to stop his advances. One cheerful 'hi grandpa!' and Zeus's boner died a confused death. Feel free to try that if he ever starts coming on to you."

"I'll... try and remember that..." Madoka suppressed a shudder at the idea of the head of the Olympians trying to seduce her. From what she heard, he was really good at it when he wanted to be too. "Anyway, the Palici twins are Aetna's?"

"Yep, the steampunk duo," Philophrosyne used her favorite nickname for the geyser gods.

"And the Cabeiri are..." Madoka fished. That part had been complicated. She wasn't entirely sure if they all shared a mother or not.

"A lovable bunch of geeks," Euthenia answered as if that explained everything. Perhaps it did.

"And you four are all daughters of 'Aphrodite light'?"

"We like to think of mom as 'dear auntie' minus the 'alpha bitch'," Eucleia insisted as she finished selecting an eyeshadow and began applying it.

"Plus more chest," Eupheme gestured to her own suggestively.

"And..." Madoka blushed at the casualness of the gesture, "there were rumors about someone named Erichthonius? Or Erechtheus?"

"Athena's favorite colonel?" Philophrosyne clarified. "He'll answer to either. And he's officially Athena's son since she raised him."

"Okay, but I keep hearing that his father was Hephaestus?"

"Yeah, but all the rumors that say that also say that he tried to force himself on Athena and even she dismisses that idea as patently ridiculous. Mom and a bunch of other gods and goddesses back her up on that too. Honestly, I think if dad had tried to force himself on her, she wouldn't be nearly as polite to him as she is. Whoever Erechtheus's birth parents are, only Athena knows for sure and she's not telling."

"Fair enough... Now... who else was there again?"

Aglaea told her story to Herfjötur and Eir, the second Valkyrie, as they sat in Hephaestus's outer office.

"I first became aware of Hephaestus when I was young. My mother was one of the ones who found him after he was cast out by his parents and took him in. She always talked about what a brilliant child he was and what a shame it was that Zeus and Hera didn't seem to want him. Then she'd complain about how he'd leave an unholy mess from tinkering with something or other and mess up her river."

That's pretty much what anyone knew about him back then, really. A smart guy who made things, worked hard, and really didn't socialize. And then Aphrodite flounced up from wherever she was from and walked on in. It's hard to explain what that was like, to be honest. She was so beautiful, confident, and sensual in everything she did that it seemed like all the gods wanted her and all the goddesses wanted to be her. Like the mortals might say, she was the 'cool girl', the alpha debutante, and anyone who tried to say otherwise suddenly found their social circle gutted. Only Hera and Athena didn't try to get on her good side and, well, Hera was the head goddess of the Olympians who didn't take kindly to the 'young upstart' and Athena would have sooner drunk poison than try to kiss up to 'the useless layabout'."

But, as I said, practically every god wanted Aphrodite and she was swamped with marriage proposals. Including a bunch from gods who were already married. And she loved every minute of it. This was, of course, before everyone found out that she was kind of a bitch. By the time my sisters and I caught on, we were her primary attendants and she wasn't about to let us go anywhere. She had everyone so wrapped around her fingers that Zeus feared she might lead a hostile takeover if she so much as glanced longingly at the head seat."

So Zeus figured that he'd nip this in the bud. If Aphrodite wasn't going to select a suitor, he'd pick one for her. And, hey, here's the kid he chucked out so long ago who's been making a name for himself with his hard work despite a limp, average appearance, and a near-constant dusting of soot. A young god who seems eager to prove

himself, dislikes Zeus, and seems just as smitten with Aphrodite as anyone else. So he decrees that they're to be married and from what I hear, Hephaestus looked like all the hardships in creation were peanuts compared to his great fortune when he heard."

So they're married, big dramatic wedding and everything, Heph arrived to his own wedding covered in dust because he'd been so busy building the honeymoon cottage from scratch that he missed his own bachelor party, and they're hitched. And then Aphrodite refuses to share their wedding bed with him. Rumor has it that she drugged her new husband into unconsciousness and snuck Ares in instead, which is how Eros was conceived."

Aphrodite makes no secret of the fact that she isn't happy with her marriage to the 'unwashed avatar of ugliness' and starts cheating on her husband without any shame whatsoever. Everyone knew she was doing it too, but for whatever reason, Zeus demanded proof. So Heph makes a net and catches Aphrodite in the act with Ares. So what does Zeus do when his son hauls his cheating wife and her paramour before the Olympian throne? He laughs at his son, faulting him for not keeping his wife honest. And everyone there starts laughing too after a few long awkward moments, because it seems like Zeus has a point. After all, for all the times he's cheated on Hera, she's never once cheated on him."

"I find that very hard to believe," a new voice intervened and Aglaea turned to see a third Valkyrie in full plate armor molded so closely to her curvaceous form that it could have been mistaken for a second skin.

"It's true," Aglaea insisted. "I overheard her admit it one of the few times she attended a 'Zeus's Lovers Anonymous' meeting from outside the door. Then she mentioned her husband's 'magic hands' and the whole room dissolved into girlish giggling."

"I'd call you a liar, but Lady Freya's a member," Eir sighed heavily. "I saw the meeting schedule on her desk once."

"Anyway," Aglaea continued, "Aphrodite says that she will never share her marriage bed with Hephaestus unless he proves himself worthy. Leaving out the fact that she seems to have rather loose standards of what that means given who all else she's slept with, Hep starts doing a bunch of things to impress her. Elaborate dates that she continually misses due to 'appointments' or acts bored during, raising Eros because neither she nor Ares can be bothered, has a couple affairs himself out of spite, followed by increasingly dangerous stunts to impress her. After Heph tried to wrestle Typhon solo, Zeus called a halt to that and demanded that Aphrodite find something less destructive that her husband could do to impress her."

Which is where I come in. Aphrodite comes in one day, looks and me and my sisters for a bit, and orders me to attend her. I'm completely confused as to what she wants, but I follow quietly. She takes me to her husband, and almost shoves me into his arms, declaring that if he truly wants to impress her, then he will become a lover worthy of a Love goddess. I get what she wants and probably turn so red that I could have been mistaken for a beet goddess, but I don't dare object. Meanwhile, she's telling him that I am to be both his tutor and appraiser in the arts of love."

"And he just went along with that?" Brynhildr folded her arms in disbelief.

"Er... not immediately?" Aglaea blushed. "He waited until his wife left before asking if I was really okay with this. I think that if I'd said no, he would have marched after his wife and told her in no uncertain terms that if she wanted a trained lover, she'd better step up and do the training herself. But I'll never know because I was half terrified of what my mistress would do if I refused and half wondering just what she was turning down in the first place. So I said 'yes'."

Aglaea blushed as she paused in her narrative and hunched in on herself shyly.

"It was the most exquisite mistake I ever made."

AdminSpace.15 (Evilhumour)

"Leave me *alone* Fand." Fenrir grumbled as the fairy floated around him as he tried to eat his mewling plate of kittens for his lunch. "I've already *got* a girlfriend!"

"But you two would be so cute together!'

"Amaterasu is an *ex* of mine," Fenrir growled out. "I was a bit of an ass when we were dating and luckily we ended things as pleasant as possible when we broke up. Again, I've *got* a girlfriend already!"

"But what about you and Bast?"

"...Are you *drunk?!* " Fenrir coughed out a kitten. "She hates my guts! And I hate hers!" Blinking, Fenrir turned to face her. "And I'm already *seeing* someone!"

"But don't you see it? Two conflicting personalities, hitting against each other until they realize the love that's hidden there-hey put me down!" With a toss, Fenrir threw the fairy Admin into the fridge and then pulled it down onto the floor, locking her inside. Struggling for a period to free herself, Fand called out a simple question to the fuming wolf. "Is that a no?"

AdminSpace.16 (Vadrigar)

Skuld was following Tama back to her terminal, still in disbelief over what the small cat had just told her and Zeus. According to Tama, she had managed to stabilize the Half-Life loops enough for an expansion, but Skuld needed to see this for herself.

"Okay Skuld-senpai, what do you want to know?"

"Okay, I need to know how you–is that a dead mouse on your terminal?"

"Yeah! Do you like it?"

"Where in Yggdrasil did you find a... you know what? Not important. How did you stabilize the Half-Life loops enough for an expansion? Those issues with the Combine and in-loop dimensional travel shouldn't have been able to be fixed by an Admin as new as you."

"Well, I remember Hephaestus-sensei telling me that no one was looking at the issues, since they weren't severe enough to focus a lot of attention on, so I decided to take a look at it myself."

"And?"

"And it was *really* confusing! All that information about computer code and dimensional travel and quantum mechanics and molecules and subatomic particles and string theory and–"

"Okay, yes, that's all very intriguing, but how did you *solve* the problem?"

"Well, since I didn't know anything about all that, and I didn't want to bother anyone here since they were all busy, I wondered: "Who do I know that knows a lot about quantum mechanics and has experience with dimensional theory?"

It took Skuld a second to realize what Tama was getting at, and when she arrived at the answer, she really wished she hadn't.

"Oh you didn't–"

"I asked Gordon!"

Skuld proceeded to slam her palm into her forehead so hard that she was later told by Tama that she lost consciousness for about half a second. Thankfully she was able to keep her footing when she woke

back up, and was able to continue the conversation with only a throbbing headache.

Not that much different from her normal conversations with other Admins, really.

"Tama, asking your anchors or loopers is NOT ALLOWED! Someone must have told you this, it could be very damaging to Yggdrasil if they were to mess with their own universe code!"

"I'm sorry! I just thought he might be happy to have someone to talk to about this kind of thing!"

"Okay, look, we can talk about this later. How much did you tell him?"

"Nothing, really. I just asked him the basics, and he started teaching me. He's a really fun teacher! Especially the parts where he yells about how other people are wrong. It reminded me of you, senpai!"

"I'm going to pretend I did not hear that. And I will drink later to *ensure* I don't remember it. What else happened?"

"Well, at one point he started ranting about how some scientists from his past used drugs wrong, and that only he knew the proper way to take drugs and be a genius at the same time. Or something like that, it was near the end of the lecture and I was getting bored. So after that loop I just asked Zurvan for help, and he helped me solve it pretty fast. He even taught me some in-loop time travel and dimensional coding tricks! Turns out it's not too different from operating a train, you just have to make sure everything works together."

Skuld still wasn't sure she fully trusted the rookie Admin with this type of problem, and would later have Hephaestus take a look at her terminal to make sure she didn't screw anything major up, but Zurvan was good at what he did, and from where she was standing she could see that the loop was going to attempt a baseline run of its expansion soon, and no issues were showing.

"Well, I wasn't expecting this today. Um, good job Tama, I'll be sure to tell Odin that the Half-Life bugs have seemingly been sorted out. Why don't you take a quick lunch break?"

"Okay senpai! But I'm done with my mouse, do you want it?"

"...No. But I think I have an idea of who might."

"Ah jeez, I'm running la~ate. Damn, still haven't gotten that timing right. Whatever, time to finally put my new grappling hook to good use."

Gordon reached into his pocket for the tool he had been wanting for so long. However, he felt a note that he didn't remember putting in there, so he took it out and read it.

Gordon

Good news! Your loop is going through an expansion! What that means is you'll be able to go forward in your timeline for the first time! This is so exciting! So I just thought I should let you know so you won't be too surprised. Have fun!

-Tama

P.S. Tama left a present for you, Freeman. Maybe you should yell at her about quantum mechanics and drugs more often. And next time you visit the ponies, PLEASE don't antagonize them as much as you did the first time. Sleipnir wanted to send you to H.R. Pufnstuf for it, but Tama was able to make him back down. You're on thin ice as long as you keep up your antics, don't forget it.

-Skuld

This note gave Gordon a lot of question to ponder. What awaited in his future? Who was Skuld? Who was Sleipnir? What was H.R. Pufnstuf, and why did the name alone make him shiver? But one

thing he liked was that Skuld had said Tama gave him a present, and he reached into his pocket, eager to see what it was.

"Oh man, a gift from god. Those are always good. Is it a new weapon? Some badass armor? A self-stocking mini-fridge? Wait, what…what the…"

It was at that moment Gordon remembered that god was, in fact, a cat.

AdminSpace.17

Apollo grinned to himself as he tiptoed into the goddess's bedroom and looked around for the proper drawer. It had been such a long time since he'd had the chance to conduct a proper panty ra–

"Ahem."

Turning, Apollo saw Nut, the Netjer goddess of the sky, in all her nighttime star-bodied glory.

"Um… hi?" the Olympian god of the sun sweatdropped.

"What exactly are you doing in my bedroom?" the goddess glared evenly at him, tapping a solitary finger on her crossed arms.

"Funny story that, the thoughtful and generous Apollo was–"

"Trying to steal my underwear?" Nut cut him off with an unamused tone. "Or is there some other reason why you have the stereotypical thief kerchief wrapped over your head and face and are carrying an empty sack headed straight for my drawers?"

"Um… Give the great Apollo a second..."

"You have five. Four. Three. Two. O–"

"Geb commissioned it!"

In an instant, Nut's face went from cool anger to rapturous.

"Really?!" the ancient goddess squealed like a crushing schoolgirl at the thought of her estranged husband of countless eons, before turning suspicious. "You're not just making that up are you?"

"The mighty Apollo swears by his mighty manhood that the honorable and lovesick Geb did make that request!" the sun god gulped nervously.

"That's so sweet of him! Stay right there, I'll get the good stuff!"

Apollo blinked as Nut went into her closet, followed by what sounded like a heavily secured safe being opened, before she reappeared with a rather large box.

"Here we go!" she thunked the box down at Apollo's feet with a massive THUD. "My best and most salacious undergarments worn while thinking of my dear Geb sealed and preserved in airtight bags to preserve freshness, photo albums of myself wearing them in various poses, a few x-rated magazines I made featuring myself with signed poster-sized centerfolds, a few home-made videos in the same vein, calendars featuring me in various outfits and states of dress to cover the next several eons (and a few that have already passed), a few dozen steamy romance novels I wrote detailing what I'd like to happen the next time we see each other, and a few models of myself to keep on his desk."

Apollo kept blinking as all of that sunk in, and wondered just how much subspace the box contained to fit everything. He also wondered just how badly those two missed each other that Nut would even consider putting a package like that together.

"Would you like the amazed Apollo to smuggle you to him as well?"

Nut's expression went excitedly giddy for a second before falling. "More than you can imagine, but I can't. Not until Ra lifts his little ban on us. I don't want to have to go through the hassle of inventing new days if I get pregnant again."

"The helpful Apollo will throw in some Olympian brand contraceptives, free of charge."

"How guaranteed are they?" Nut crossed her arms in challenge.

"My father only has a fraction of the children he otherwise would have."

"If half the things I've heard about him are true, that's pretty impressive," Nut admitted. "But the last time I snuck off to see Geb, we burned through a millenia's worth of contraceptives in a month before Ra caught us and I still ended up with quintuplets. Osiris, Isis, Set, Nepthys, and Horus. The elder, not my grandson."

"...maybe not *that* guaranteed," Apollo admitted.

"Thanks for the offer though."

"Tell you what, the sympathetic Apollo will talk to Ra, sun god to sun god, and see if he can change the old coot's mind."

"It probably won't work."

"The honest Apollo doesn't foresee it being successful, true, but he will make the attempt anyway. After delivering this chest of most treasured treasures to Geb as promised."

AdminSpace.18

"Madoka?" the voice prompted the relatively junior goddess to turn around from her terminal and look at the falcon-headed Admin at the

entrance to her cubicle.

"Yes, Horus?" the former Anchor asked politely. "What can I do for you?"

"I have a package here that needs to get to my uncle," Horus told her, bringing out a sealed box and holding it out, "but I'm going to be busy later. Can you hold onto it until he comes to pick it up?"

"Sure," Madoka nodded and accepted the package from the Netjer. "You can count on me!"

"Glad to hear it!" Horus smiled and walked away.

"Pardon me, did my nephew leave a package here earlier?" the voice interrupted Madoka a while later. Turning around in confusion, Madoka clarified that, yes, this was the same Admin who had been by earlier.

"Sorry, Horus, but no," Madoka replied in confusion. "Your uncle hasn't been by either."

"Uncle?" Horus asked in confusion. "I'm afraid you must be mistaken. My father has no brothers."

"Huh? But when you were here earlier..."

"Are you sure you're feeling alright?" Horus asked in concern. "I haven't been here all day."

"But... I know... You..." Madoka gestured about in puzzled bewilderment.

"Well, if you spot my nephew, would you ask where he left the package I asked for?" Horus asked before turning to leave a completely confused Madoka behind.

"That was mean, brother," Nephthys glared at a chuckling Horus as he walked away from the young goddess's cubicle. "Why you and our nephew insist on pulling that stupid trick on everyone is beyond me, but you could at least cut the poor girl a break. She's had it rough enough."

"You're welcome to let her in on the joke, dear sister," Horus invited with a sweep of his arms. "I certainly don't mind and I know my dear identical nephew doesn't either."

Nephthys hesitated. "I'll wait a bit... If she figures it out before her shift is over, I win the betting pool. And if she comes after the two of you with a blunt object, I get the bonus jackpot. And pictures."

Horus blinked before looking down to see that his sister was indeed carrying a camera. "Er... how did you know we were...?"

"Honestly, brother," Nephthys smirked. "You and our nephew pull that 'Horus' and 'Horus' trick on everyone sooner or later. You're very predictable in that way."

AdminSpace.19 (Evilhumour)

As Fenrir yawned, he was aware that some was in his office. Rolling his eyes as he kept his massive mouth open for a bit longer, he suddenly felt paws on the side of his lower jaw.

"Wow Fenrir, you've got a *really* big mouth!" Tama, the new cat goddess hopped over his razor sharp teeth and stared *up* at his jaw, if the reflection of his monitor was anything to go by. "How can the inside of your mouth be bigger then it is on the outside?"

"Because of my status of a Devourer and Destruction god, and can you *please* get out of my mouth!" Of course, all Fenrir got out was a garbled mess.

"Heh, you're funny," Tama smiled, circling around his already drying out tongue before she started to kneed it. "And your tongue is so comfy!" With a yawn, she curled up and took a nap, leaving Fenrir utterly confused, hungry and terrified.

Hephaestus raised an eyebrow when Fenrir stormed into his office with his mouth open, the Valkyries at odds with Fenrir being so near them.

Without any warning, Fenrir spat something directly at Hephaestus's lap before growling loudly. Looking down as his trio of parole officers leap up to deal with the wolf god, the volcano god saw his latest student covered in spit and saliva.

"Keep your damn hairball *out* of my office!" Fenrir shouted, turning smarting on his hind paws before storming out of his office.

Looking down at Tama who had the decency to try and escape punishment by widening her eyes, the Admin sighed and tried to wonder when *he* became a father figure.

AdminSpace.20

Brynhildr was currently on desk duty in Hephaestus's outer office while her shield sisters were helping to keep watch over the forge god's more stable assignments in the inner office (so they could technically be fulfilling their assigned duty of keeping an eye on the Olympian who had overseen the events leading to The Crash) while Hephaestus managed his latest trainee.

"Hello?" an annoyingly familiar voice cut into the Valkyrie's thoughts, prompting her to look up and see Aphrodite enter the office. Oh, joy... "Is my worthless husband in?"

"He's busy at the moment," Brynhildr replied in a bored tone, silently daring the Olympian goddess of love and beauty to try something, "can I take a message?"

"I was just wondering if he'd come to his senses yet and was prepared to properly beg my forgiveness," the vain Admin sniffed.

'Yeah, and you've spontaneously developed empathy after eons of outright avoiding the concept,' Brynhildr lowered the lids of her eyes to half mast to properly convey her contempt. "Do you have an actual reason to be here for once, or are you just going to waste my time again?"

"Of all the impudence!" Aphrodite recoiled with overly dramatic offense. "Fine, then! I suppose you don't want the generous gift of perfect divine beauty second only to my own! I was going to grace you with it for your generous assistance, bu–"

'Oh, please, as if I'd ever want to be so soft and out of shape after enjoying Freya's blessings,' Brynhildr tuned the ranting goddess out as she rummaged in the desk drawer for her and her shield sisters' latest anti-annoyance weapon. *'I prefer to kick ass rather than wail over chipped nails–Here we go...'*

"–and furthermore... Why are you shining a laser pointer at my forehead?"

"LASER POINTER!" a calico missile squealed as it shot out of the inner office straight for Aphrodite's face.

"AAIIIEEEEEEE!" Aphrodite screamed as the latest goddess of the Shinto pantheon latched onto her face with all the enthusiasm of a distracted housecat.

"Do you *have* to do that to my latest student every–" Hephaestus began his usual half-hearted admonishment before he saw who the current target was. "Never mind, as you were."

AdminSpace.21 (Evilhumour, kingofsouls, and myself)

With a sigh, Skuld wiped the pie off her face and glared at everyone in the lunchroom, which resembled a war zone of elementary children once again. Stepping over the tossed food and smaller Admins, she walked over to the side.

Raven was lowering Tama down after the two had teamed up for aerial food bombardment as Fand stepped out of the freezer covered in icecream, the Ekien Admin was still struggling to get herself out of food tray dispenser, Loki was trying to hide his cabbage cannons behind himself poorly and everyone else was trying to hide their actions poorly.

With a grunt, Skuld removed the two numbers from the board of Days From Last Food Fight and set it back to zero.

She mused to herself that she really wished one day they could get to triple digits as she used her hammer to launch an entire table of pastries at the Admins before walking out of the room.

On the other side of the lunchroom, Yi and Madoka raced behind their oveturned table they used as cover as the pastries fell from above. The war continued and the two archers rose form their cover, their bows armed with a dozen carrots each. "Aim for Fei-Lian!" Yi shouted. "I need to add some veggies to that blowhards diet!"

Madoka on the other hand simply sighed as the two let loose their abnormal ammo. *'I really hope Hephaestus doesn't get too angry at me...'*

Hephaestus stared at his two current apprentices. The young magical girl and the even younger housecat had the good grace to look abashed underneath the layers of frosting and pastry they were still covered with.

"What am I supposed to do with you two?" the forge god sighed.

"Let us run them through their paces?" Eir suggested, getting nods from her shield sisters.

"Bad enough they got into a schoolyard food fight in the Admin cafeteria," Brynhildr folded her arms. "But worse, they *lost* ."

"By the time we're done with the two of you, you'll have superior endurance, speed, agility, throwing power, and situational awareness," Herfjötur grinned wickedly. "You'll probably also hate us, but that's beside the point."

"All good things to have," Hephaestus nodded. "But I am particularly disappointed in myself for not instilling an appreciation in one final core tenant regarding such matters."

The forge god heaved a massive contraption from behind his desk onto it, and the two trainee goddesses could only stare at the huge gatling gun that looked built for shooting pies.

"If at all possible, bring superior firepower."

AdminSpace.22 (Evilhumour)

"And here Tama, is the *best* place for naps." Fenrir gestured with a paw to the empty office, nosing the cat towards a blank wall before taping some codes into the computer. The wall fell and a roaring fireplace took its place. The ceiling retracted to show a sun shining down on a carpeted rug. Turning around in spot, Fenrir curled up in front of the fire, smiling at the wide eye cat. "It will be our little secret, right?"

Tama nodded her head before leaping onto Fenrir's head, curling up with a big yawn before going to sleep.

AdminSpace.23 (Evilhumour)

Silence is a concept that a bit foreign to most people for a number of reasons; maturity usually playing a factor.

"Okay, who started *another* damn water fight?!" A voice rang out before being pelted with water balloons and other devices of soakage. Madoka and her pseudo sister Tama had borrowed their pseudo father's latest invention, and teaming up with Fenrir and the Dino trio, the six of them had caused liquid havoc on unsuspecting Admins, with laughter following them. Zeus and Hades were seen fleeing their brother, as things were in his favour for a change and the tricksters gods were unleashing water related booby trap hell on everyone. Of course, Skuld was completely dominating the field, trading her usual hammer in for the water based one.

It might not directly be helping Yggdrasil but it was good to vent steam every once in awhile and water was *far* easier to clean up then food.

That was until someone got the Flying Spaghetti Monster wet and then things got *messy.*

AdminSpace.24 (Evilhumour)

"OKAY, THE *NEXT* BLITHERING IDIOT THAT *FUCKS* SOMETHING UP IS GOING TO GET MY HAMMER SHOVED THROUGH A HOLE AND OUT ANOTHER HOLE! DON'T COME TO ME IF IT IS NOT DAMN IMPORTANT OR YGGDRASIL IS ON *FIRE!* " Skuld roared through the intercom before taking a moment to breath in and out, trying to calm her anger when there was a knock on her door. "WHAT?!"

Without any hesitation, Tama opened the door, walked up to her and hopped onto her lap. "What-what are you doing Tama?" Skuld tried

to keep her anger up but was breaking under the nuzzling and kneading of the young goddess.

"You are too angry," she said, arching her head up. "Kitty therapy is now in session."

Skuld just stared down at the cat before sputtering out in laughter. "And what, pray tell, *is* kitty therapy?"

"It's simple," Tama said with a smile. "You rub kitty until kitty says to stop."

Shaking her head at the silliness of it all, Skuld ran a hand across Tama's belly, her anger already a distant memory.

AdminSpace.8 - A Former Lover Part 3

Athena stared at the smiling Pandora, idly noting that the 'first woman turned goddess' had rearranged her facial piercings and tattoos again.

"...you have a cat on your head," the goddess of wisdom noted in a tone that demanded explanation.

"Well, since Tama here is dad's newest apprentice, that makes her part of the family, like Madoka!" Pandora chirped.

"And Pandora-chan volunteered to introduce me to all the different moms I get to have now!" the cat added. "Hi, I'm Tama!"

Athena sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Pandora... for the thousandth time, while I am honored to claim you as my daughter, I do not have any intention of extending similar consideration to the rest of Hephaestus's brood, adopted or otherwise."

"What about that Erechtheus guy?"

"Hephaestus has no official parental claim on him, nor are the particulars of his parentage any of your business."

"Yeah, mom won't even tell me."

"That is because I know you cannot keep a secret."

"True enough," Pandora shrugged.

"So..." Eir broke the prolonged silence. "You taught Hephaestus how to be a good lover."

Aglaea blushed crimson and hunched in on herself shyly. "Technically speaking, I just helped him refine what he'd already started figuring out. He's always been good with his hands. I just told him which places were better to put them."

"Uh-huh..." Herfjötur replied levelly. "Given how fast he learns, that had to have taken all of an afternoon."

"W-well... there was repeated practice of course... further refinement of technique... fine-tuning as we both discovered more, um, 'hot spots' I hadn't thought of originally... positions... lots and lots of positions to practice in... repeatedly for technique and to build endurance... t-toys to learn about..."

"And in some cases invent, I bet," Brynhildr smirked. "Did you two even leave the bedroom?"

"Y-yes!" Aglaea blushed crimson. "B-being a good lover is more than just sex! It's r-romance! Flirting... seduction... feeling each other out to get to know likes and dislikes..."

"All the things Aphrodite says she likes more than anything but could never be bothered to try with her own husband."

"Yes... Th-that's why I asked him to start with attempting to woo me like he would his own wife at the time... So I could see what he was doing wrong..."

"And?"

"And... It was magical... He took me on a walk through the most beautiful forest to a grove of amazing flowers where he had set up a candlelight dinner for two under the stars that he cooked himself with a bottle of Dionysus's best chilling in a bucket nearby..."

"Sounds like an A+ date to me," Eir grinned. "Though I think I'd have preferred a sporting event myself."

"We um... we watched the sun rise together... without clothes..."

"I'll bet."

"It... it turned out that while Heph knew a lot about what to do on a date, he didn't really know how to read women that well. So... so I helped teach him the secrets of how to tell if a goddess was interested or not. How to know when he was being flirted with and how best to flirt back. I... I took acting classes from the Muses so I could give him experience with different types of women. I wanted... I told myself I wanted to accurately portray his wife so I could teach him how to seduce her like he seemed to want."

"But...?"

"Well... I got pregnant," Aglaea admitted. "By the time I gave birth to my first daughter, the children Heph already had were treating me like part of the family and that was when I realized..."

"You didn't want it to end," Brynhildr nodded.

"No, I didn't. But I knew that if he ever got to a level that my mistress would deem acceptable, that I was duty-bound to report the success to her and watch them go on to live happily together... without me."

Herfjötur snorted in derision.

"I didn't know then what I know now," Aglaea defended herself. "I didn't know there was no standard my mistress would accept from her 'plain' husband. I truly believed that if he met such a standard, our time together would end. And so I kept... increasing the standards. Kept inventing new trials for him to pass. We memorized every variant of the divine sutra together. After the birth of my second daughter, I increased that to every mortal technique. After the birth of my third, and knowing that he knew me so well that there would be only token improvements between just the two of us, I started assigning him to seduce other goddesses of my choosing and practicing his techniques with them. I got away with that through the birth of my fourth daughter, all the while living with him like I was his wife instead of my mistress."

"I remember that," Eir spoke up suddenly. "Everyone actually thought you two *were* married, right? Except no one could remember when he divorced Aphrodite."

Aglaea nodded. "I don't know exactly when it happened. I was so focused on finding new ways to keep the arrangement going that I never stopped to think how it looked to others. Never stopped to think that we were living in a house he built for us after the 'training' began, or that we were raising our children together and I was acting like a mother to the children he already had. But at some point, everyone started treating us like we'd always been married. And so... I decided that I would petition my mistress to make it official..."

"Oh, that couldn't have gone well..."

Aglaea thought back to the gossip she'd overheard when she'd gone to see her mistress while she was talking with a goddess from another pantheon.

"Oh, how precious! You actually thought I'd let my worthless husband out of our union to remarry? Much less to one of my own attendants? Ohohohohoho! Goodness, but that's funny! I merely

gave him one of my attendants to amuse himself with so that he'd stop hounding me all the time when I'm off with worthier paramours! Frankly, I'm amazed that the poor thing hasn't stormed off in disgust yet!"

"No... no it didn't..." Aglaea admitted. "That was when I learned that my mistress had no intention to either accept Heph as a lover, or let him go to seek happiness with another. And so... I did something a bit foolish... I told her that I had judged Heph to be a lover of exceptional ability. Well worth the attentions of a love goddess."

All three Valkyries winced.

"She... laughed at me. It... made me angry, and in my anger I demanded to know what standard she would accept as proof that he had become such a lover. She... she gave me a look that sent chills down my spine before telling me that she would only accept Heph as a proper lover if he could seduce one of the eternal maidens of Olympus out of her vows of chastity."

"Hestia, Artemis, or Athena," Brynhildr grimaced painfully. "And he went for Athena."

"I remember hearing about that incident," Eir nodded gravely.

" *Everyone* remembers hearing about that incident," Herfjötur clarified. "Half of the heavens were at that party of Dionysus's and everyone swore up and down that they saw Hephaestus try and force himself on Athena."

"Yeah, everyone except Athena herself who swore the opposite," Brynhildr reminded them. "And she was the least drunk."

"I'd told Hephaestus everything about his wife's final demand," Aglaea continued, "and he made the decision to approach Athena. Partly because he didn't see Hestia as anything but his aunt, partly because going after Artemis would mean he had to deal with Apollo, and partly..."

"Partly..."

"Partly because... I think deep down, Heph regretted not trying to woo Athena instead of Aphrodite."

"Hephaestus and Athena? That's... I could see that working really well actually."

"Me too," Aglaea admitted. "Which is why; even though Heph swore to me that all that happened was he led Athena to a private room to talk, that he simply told her up front about his wife's demand to prove his 'worthiness' and they discussed possibilities for dealing with it; I can't help but note that Athena took a sabbatical soon after glaring the rumors into submission and returned about nine months later with a baby Erichthonius, claiming to have found him in a corn field."

"You don't..."

"If I'm right, I doubt either of them will ever admit to it. And... and I respect both of them too much to tell my suspicions to too many people. If either of them had and wanted others to know, they'd have rubbed it in my mistress's face back then rather than keep quiet. Maybe even used it to demand she divorce him. Instead, Heph told me to go report that he'd passed my mistress's secret test and respected the choice of the maiden rather than tried to force himself on her. That he was worthy in all respects and it was time she admitted to it."

"That didn't happen, I take it."

"Oh, you poor dear! I am so sorry to hear that your standards have fallen so low that you would believe the lies that spill out of your own mouth! Don't you worry, though. Mistress Aphrodite will make it all better."

Aglaea shook her head in the negative, emotion choking her words out as she remembered what came next.

"The... the last time we saw each other was..." Aglaea was suddenly aware of another watching her and looked up to see the unreadable gaze of the most rugged and handsome man she'd ever encountered. No matter what anyone else said. It was him. The one who'd claimed her heart beyond all hope of recovery, looking as good and strong as the day she'd last seen him.

"...was the day my faithless wife declared that my efforts to become a worthy lover had ended in failure. That you had proclaimed me to be, and I quote, 'the most hopeless man in the bedroom since the dawn of creation itself', 'unfit to touch any true woman', and that you 'never wanted to see me again'. All while you and your sisters stood silently behind her and said not a word before she left and called for you to attend her without so much as a glance back."

"I... Mistress Aphrodite... she–"

"Lied through her teeth? Believe me when I say that I am not surprised now, nor would I have been then."

Aglaea's vision blurred as her eyes teared up before throwing herself at her former lover's feet. "I'm sorry! I should have spoken up! I should have defended you to her! I should have done anything but stand there obediently as she asked while she slandered you so! You shared something glorious with me and I betrayed it with my silence!"

She sensed movement and remained still, resigned to whatever punishment he deemed appropriate.

She wasn't prepared for him to wrap her in a hug with his strong muscular arms. Nor was she prepared for three slender, but no less strong, pairs of feminine arms to join his in the hug. It was so much more kindness than her betrayal deserved, and she wept.

"It's okay," Hephaestus assured her. "I know my wife's ways. She may be a love goddess, but she has always seen more value in the pursuit of love than its realization. More value in appearances than in

the substance behind them. She uses her sweet-seeming words to strip away your values and replace them with her own shallow ones. Once, I could have loved her had she given me the chance to do so, but even past the faults she saw in me, she never had any use for a husband, only for suitors and hopefuls. I let her destroy my sense of self-worth to a point that even my own parents never managed, and it was only your tender affections that began to undo her damage. Your silence hurt, yes, but it didn't hurt just me. When I saw the unspoken hurt in your eyes at what my wife said that day, that was when the desire I once felt for her began to die."

"Yeah, I think all of the heavens heard it when you finally lost your temper with her," Brynhildr chuckled into the hug.

"Probably," Hephaestus allowed, keeping the hug up. "I told her, amidst lots of profanity, I'd had enough and that she was a terrible wife. She screamed that I was the worst husband ever, that I should be begging her forgiveness for my many failings. I yelled that if she had any shred of decency, she'd have divorced me long ago. She screamed that the only way I was getting out of our marriage was if one of us up and died a true death. I... did my level best to take her up on the offer. I'm told the crater she left on impact was rather sizable and she was laid up in the hospital for a good long while recovering."

"It was..." Aglaea sniffed. "My sisters and I had to do everything for her while she recovered. Where did you go afterwards?"

"I went to the Havaiki's territory. Looked up Pele and spent the next couple of decades taking my frustrations towards my wife out in fits of mutual volcanic passion."

"And came back with Thalia..." Aglaea noted.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to help raise her. My mistress forbade me to ever see you again. She threatened to curse my appearance to

ugliness and ruin whatever reputation I had left. Make it so you'd never want me again..."

"My wife is an idiot if she ever thought that was possible."

"Thank you... I'm so sorry... All this time wasted... I... I never stopped loving you... But... I understand if you've moved on..."

The group hug unfolded, releasing Aglaea from its center, and allowing Hephaestus to look the goddess in the eyes.

"You, who showed me what married life should have been like; with all the passion, all the love, all the trust, as well as all the pitfalls, arguments, and compromises; will always have a place in my heart."

"You remembered the muses' coaching," Aglaea's laughter was choked with tears.

"It's hard to forget," Hephaestus admitted. "But we can't go back to what we once had. And my wife will never let me free."

"I..." Aglaea sniffed and wiped away her tears as best she could. "I'll take whatever I can get..."

"Good," Eir interrupted, "because you should know that miss Aglaea here was sent on an errand by Aphrodite."

"Offer to my lovely assistants for divine beauty treatments, Eiken vacation package, cheap dating service as, complaint, or a reminder about arranging Eiken fused Loops?" Hephaestus raised an expectant eyebrow.

"Last one," Herfjötur spoke before a blushing Aglaea could. "And it's super-important. Why, if the poor girl doesn't get results, she might never be sent back with another message or request ever again."

"You know full well I'm not inclined to grant anything my wife wants without good reason," Hephaestus folded his arms thoughtfully.

"Which is why she should be allowed a chance to negotiate," Brynhildr smirked, catching on to where the other two were headed. "Intense, vigorous negotiations behind closed doors with 'do not disturb' signs in place."

Aglaea eeped and turned red again as she caught on to the insinuations.

"Oh, yes," Herfjötur agreed hungrily. "Hard-pounding arguments, back and forth, loudly and repeatedly."

"Demands taken to the *edge* of reason and back again, over and over..." Eir purred.

"Or," Hephaestus cut in as Aglaea's blush threatened to go nuclear, "if you prefer to take this slowly we can just talk out here, calmly and quietly, to see if there's an agreement we can come to."

"Boring..." all three Valkyries chorused.

Aglaea thought for a moment, her embarrassment pounding in her ears. Taking the Valkyries' suggestion would probably be a mistake. A really big mistake.

A really big, exquisite mistake.

"F-first option...?" she stuttered hesitantly. "Please?"

Thalia blinked at the sight of the 'do not disturb' sign on the door to her father's office politely asking that whoever it was return later. Checking the hall, the nymph slipped out a spare key and unlocked the door to enter the exterior office and quietly creeped up to the door to the inner office to listen.

After a few seconds of her grin getting bigger, she snuck back out of the office quietly and locked the door behind her.

"Go dad..."

Aphrodite blinked as her top-heavy intern practically skipped back into the office after many hours on her assignment and slapped three completed fused Loop approval forms signed by Hephaestus. Two for standard post-Loop crash queues and one for a scheduled maintenance call.

"Not bad," the goddess of love admitted reluctantly. "I was worried your history with my husband would... influence your performance."

"Nope!" the girl chirped, entirely too chipper. "He has absolutely no effect on me."

"Then why do you look like you just got laid, hmm?" Aphrodite crooned with interest. Honestly, the girl thinking she could hide something like that from the Goddess of Lo–

"I met someone nice on the way back!" her intern admitted freely.

"Oh, really? Who is he? Anyone I might... know?" Aphrodite recovered from her surprise quickly.

"Probably not, I doubt she's your type."

Aphrodite's brain ground to a halt. "She?"

"Yes! She's with–"

"No, you're right! Definitely not my type!" Aphrodite interrupted quickly. Honestly... women loving women? What madness was that? Still, if it kept her intern off her husband, she'd... overlook the deviancy. "Good job, I suppose. Now back to work. Eiken won't run itself!"

She noted her other two interns, Euphrosyne and Thalia (no relation to the muse or that hideous nymph her husband had sired with a

foreign goddess), roll their eyes at her words as their sister took up her station and immediately dove right in with an enthusiasm that Aphrodite didn't recognize.

"What are you doing, exactly?" she asked after several moments confusion.

"Full code examination of the Loop," Aglaea smiled back eagerly. "Just to double-check that it's maintaining stability and hasn't suffered any minor shifts that could become large shifts down the line. Long, boring busy work but it has to be done every now and then and I know you hate it."

"Well, yes... excellent drive. Good show," Aphrodite composed herself. Unnatural or not, if... 'associating' with this new, ugh, *girl* friend of her intern's produced this kind of work ethic, then she might just subtly encourage the relationship. And if she continued to be this successful in both getting concessions from Aphrodite's worthless husband and ignoring his *other* attentions, then the Goddess of Love just might have to send her out on more errands.

Aglaea simply smiled to herself as she continued examining the code for Eiken, mentally composing its many quirks and Aphrodite's personal 'tweaks' into a file for Hephaestus and his three Valkyries. Their advice as to what Aphrodite's personal aversions were (due to long practice exploiting them ruthlessly) looked like it was going to make life for her much easier.

AdminSpace.25 (Evilhumour)

"So you see Fenrir, this model is *far* superior to the previous system we have in place," Skuld gestured to the glowing screen of information of the wolf's Branches, videos and files all arranged to his preferred style. "All you need to do is tap for whatever you want far quicker than using the keyboard method."

Fenrir sighed, shaking his head. "I've told you in the past, I *like* the keyboard and mouse method and I *really* don't care much for this wide, interactive multidimensional interface."

"Okay Fenny," Skuld said, ignoring the low growl at her. "Give me *one* good, non personal reason why you *cannot* use this method and I will drop it."

Fenrir raised an eyebrow at her, and placed a paw on the screen, setting off several codes at once. With a gulp, Skuld moved Fenrir out of the way and quickly went to see what happened.

"Okay, I get it; your paws are too big and I guess if we make all the stuff bigger for your paws hit only *one* thing, it'd be murder on your eyes," Skuld muttered to herself. "Okay, not much damage; it seems that you let loose a shoggoth into your brother's Branch but he was able to plug it with his Anchor's tree, you caused it to rain some sharks in the Dino Trio's branches *somehow* and..." Skuld frowned, leaning close to the screen. "And it seems you found Yggdrasil's glitterball command. *Annnnnd* now a number of Loops have a disco theme stuck in them," she sighed, quickly doing her best to undo the light damage before becoming aware of the large grin on the Admin's face next to her. "Okay, I get it **,** touch screen is not for everyone!"

" *Thank you* ," Fenrir bobbed his head and left the office to enjoy a much deserved break.

AdminSpace.26

Madoka sighed as she walked back to her terminal, her mind once again wandering to the issue of her not-so-lost branch and its secretly continued existence saved on her bow. If her mentor was to be believed, the confusion in the wake of her Ascension and the subsequent severing of her branch from Yggdrasil proper had led to most Admins not realizing that she'd 'saved' her universe to her bow... like a data file. Nor had they caught her popping down to

transfer Homura to her bow until after the deed was done and forbidden her from going back to the mortal realm without permission until they figured out what to do with her.

Which had led to her being shuffled around and largely ignored until someone had the bright idea to shuffle her off to Hephaestus for Admin training so she could be put to work. Something that had proven... enlightening on many levels.

The Olympian forge god might be lame in one leg, and stressed from overwork, but his mind was as sharp as anything. Sharp enough to know the secrets she'd thought hidden from the rest of the Admins. Sharp enough to realize that she wasn't ready to reveal those secrets.

Sharp enough to tell her that she'd have to reveal them eventually anyway.

It had weighed upon her since then. Through being assigned to the rag-tag bunch known as travelling loopers, freeing up Dionysus to do... who knew what. Through the granting of additional Loops to her docket, like the formerly (and still semi, she supposed) safe-mode Smash Bros branch. The knowledge and implications of what she'd done came back to her mind without fail and tormented her with the possibility.

The possibility that the data on her bow could be used to undo her universe's destruction.

A realization that was always followed by doubts. Like what had happened to the rest of her looping friends? She'd found Homura before being confined to the heavens previously, but not the others. And would the Admins even allow her to put her universe back? Or would they perhaps say it was a lost cause and tell her to finish the job?

Madoka sighed to herself and sat at her small terminal in her cubicle. It was a back-and-forth tangle of divine possibility and worry... like

some nth-dimensional Gordian Knot that promised to unleash untold chaos upon being cut. What did you do with something like that?

YOU CUT IT ANYWAY.

Madoka blinked at the words on her screen.

K. ANANSI: Damn straight I cut it anyway. The look on her face was priceless when I did it too. She was so busy trying to immolate me with her glare that it never occurred to her to chase after me as I took off.

Madoka pinched the bridge of her nose and began typing.

OLD MAN COYOTE: THAT'S AWESOME! I HOPE YOU GOT PICTURES!

MADOKA K.: What have I told you two about using my terminal to host your chat rooms?

OLD MAN COYOTE: NO IDEA. I WAS TOO DISTRACTED BY HOW CUTE YOU ARE WHEN YOU'RE ANGRY. WE SHOULD TOTALLY GET A MAY-DECEMBER ROMANCE GOING ON. ZEUS AND HIS KIDS MAY BE KNOWN FOR HAVING MAGIC HANDS, BUT I'M TOTALLY KNOWN FOR MY MAGIC TONGUE.

Madoka twitched as she read that.

K. Anansi: "Look at that, she's got the twitch going on again," the aggravatingly familiar voice spoke from behind her in time with the words on her screen. Madoka whirled to see a tall, thin dark-skinned man dressed in ill-fitting clothes that probably belonged to someone else not too long ago and a weathered and very tan man dressed like a tribal cowboy. Both were sporting ridiculously wide grins and steampunk headsets that emitted puffs of smoke.

The tricksters Kwaku Anansi and Old Man Coyote.

"You know, I'm normally into the more full-bodied women, especially in the chest," Anansi mused teasingly as he cupped his hands in front of his chest suggestively, "but I'd totally be down with some 'web play' if you asked nicely."

"Don't you two have anything better to do than make lewd propositions?" Madoka asked as Anansi waggled his eyebrows at her, trying to restrain herself from smacking the two over their smugly grinning heads. That only encouraged them.

"Aside from testing rather pointless knick-knacks for the Palici twins... not really," Coyote grinned and laughed like the mortal animal that shared his name.

"Hey, those knick-knacks are important inventions for turning divine speech to text wirelessly!" a male voice spoke from Madoka's right and she whipped around to see one of the Palici twins standing there looking at her monitor.

"And there's still a few bugs," an identical voice spoke from Madoka's other side as the second twin examined the all-caps entries. "As for those two, they'd probably stop hitting on you if you were with someone."

"Then again, maybe not," the first twin shrugged, "but it would be worth a shot, eh?"

"Please tell me this wasn't an elaborate ruse to ask me out," Madoka sighed.

"Okay," the second twin nodded.

"We won't tell you," the first finished.

"Look, I'm really not interested right now you two," Madoka sighed some more. She was doing a lot of that lately. She'd been getting depressingly good at it too.

"That's fine."

"Just let us know if you–"

–change your mind, after all–"

"–we're geyser gods, so we know all about–"

"–everything steamy–"

The twins leaned in to whisper hot breath directly into Madoka's ears.

"–and–"

"–we–"

"–really–"

"–like–"

"–to–"

"– *share* ."

Madoka felt her face heat up several degrees.

"Not bad," Coyote mused. "Interesting shade of red on the girl there too. I give it an 8.5."

"I'm going to have to go with a 7," Anansi countered. "Because they left the poor girl too shocked and embarrassed to respond in the affirmative were she so inclined. A good seduction doesn't shoot itself in the foot like that."

"Get. Out." Madoka growled at the four. They all left laughing, and the twins blew kisses that had her face heating up again. Why oh why did she have to be an immortal goddess with teenage hormones?

Madoka sighed again, much heavier this time as the redness in her face receded.

Because she had to listen when Kyubey told her that more powerful wishes would let her protect her Loop better. The sociopathic incubator was far too charming for anyone's good at times.

But that was in the past, and she had work to do now to safeguard the future of existence.

Grunt work, mostly, but still necessary work.

She checked her terminal for anything regarding the myriad of traveling loopers under her charge.

Her autonomous avatar with Sam Beckett was working just fine. It didn't even distract her anymore she was so used to it and the memories it gathered were as natural as ever.

Typing a bit more, she giggled at the antics of Jenny Everywhere and Axel Asher as they were off on another adventure somewhere she didn't quite recognize. She'd look it up later. Those two tended to do just fine.

She frowned a bit as she spotted Blues Light, the Proto Man, but there was nothing to do there. She'd offered to listen to his issues if he wanted to talk to a confidential source or even just give him a hug but he'd rather firmly told her 'no'.

A quick check on the other odds and ends that made up the traveling loopers, including a thorough one to make sure that Kyubey wasn't about to try any of his usual stunts, and Madoka concluded that she had time to work on her personal project.

Pulling up a soul file, she looked over the code that had at some point in its baseline fractured straight down the middle, creating two distinct 'half-souls'. It was mostly patched together after a great deal

of time working on it, but she was almost done. She hoped that Hephaestus approved her work.

"I... I want to try and help her... them..."

"Her, if you succeed. The original was perhaps meant to be female and the female half of this fractured soul has forged the strongest connections with others."

"Her. I... she deserves to be whole. To have a chance at happiness. She can, right?"

"I won't lie to you Madoka. Even if you succeed, it is likely to be hard on her. Souls, even those that come about through artificial methods, do not fracture for no reason. And beyond that, she lives in an age of war. Her existence will be one of great pain."

"Then... I shouldn't...?"

"Quite the contrary. Simply because existence is painful does not make it pointless. If anything, the pain validates the struggles faced by all, from the smallest mortal organism to the greatest divine existence. That it is hard makes the struggle all the more worth it. At least, that is what I have concluded."

Madoka narrowed her focus and got to work, carefully stitching the fractured soul back together. Bit by bit.

AdminSpace.27

The action scientist known as Atomic Robo blinked as he examined his surroundings in the new Loop. The Satellite of Love. Another Loop filled with terrible movies, no way to escape having to watch them, and no defense save his well-honed snarking abilities. Joy.

'Filing Memo:' he thought to himself. *'Harmonic resonance heart-songs using Beatles music against the Shadow From Beyond Time are a BAD IDEA.'*

As it turned out, magically convincing the universe-devouring eldritch abomination that 'all it needed was love' ended up with it devouring the very concept of Love from the universe. A process that was apparently much simpler than devouring the whole universe in all time periods. Things had gone very pear-shaped very quickly after that.

So here he was, bereft of any looping abilities, including his Zorth-Access Storage Device (his preferred version of the common looper technique known as the subspace pocket, partly because he invented it himself), and indeed anything his local body wasn't built with. And since his local body was built with salvaged parts of the Satellite of Love's 'non-essential systems'... yeah, it wasn't going to have anything impressive.

At least it was better than the one time he'd been to that Eiken place. Honestly, plate steel alloy was a good material for many robotic body types, but feminine models with ridiculous chest endowments were not among the list. By the end of that Loop, the literal wrecking balls attached to 'her' chest had resulted in restraining orders from fifteen states and a hundred additional cities (that 'she' knew of) as well as job offers from every demolitions contractor in the book and a few that weren't. He'd have to thank his Admin for keeping him out of there at some point.

Whoever that happened to be.

"So..." Hephaestus addressed his three parole officers/interns with folded arms, "how long have you three been running the Atomic Robo branch without my knowledge?"

The three Valkyries exchanged glances, and Brynhildr stepped forward to answer.

"Since it got added to your docket," she told him, her expression the picture of military professionalism. "We were about to inform you when we heard a rather lengthy string of expletives regarding your current attempts to get the X and Zero sections of the Mega branch stabilized. So we collectively decided to handle it ourselves unless something went wrong."

"So, since before I started training Madoka..." Hephaestus sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Probably from the branch's activation, even. Honestly, I'm not sure whether to congratulate you for your good work or bang my head against the wall in frustration that you went behind my back like that."

"It seemed like the most prudent course of action at the time, sir."

"It probably was, but I'd still have liked to know that I'd been assigned another Loop to monitor," the forge god noted a tensing in the three Valkyries' shoulders at his words. "...You haven't taken on any more new Loops for me since... have you?"

"Well..."

Chance Fortune Bonus Loop

"Chance!" Psi-Chick yelled as she stormed into her boyfriend's room, waving an e-reader in fury and trying not to lose control of her powers in her anger. " *When* were you going to tell me that our baseline got an extension and that you *died* in it?!"

"Well..." Chance Fortune, real name Joshua Blevins, the 'super hero' in training with no true superpowers, floundered for a bit, "I don't *technically* die..."

"Don't argue semantics with me!" Psy-Chick fumed. "You end up at the center of a nuclear explosion!"

"Saving the world, my family, everyone I care about, the world, the future, and Helix–"

"I read the damn epilogue!" Psy-Chick screamed. "That little imp pulls you into something that's a point of view away from an afterlife allegory! He flat out *tells* you that your own universe, not just everyone in it but the *universe itself* , thinks you're dead!"

"Look, so long as the Shadowbite never gets me, that won't happen. Heck, even when that does happen, those specific events don't. Everything that happens after we leave the Shadow Zone is still anyone's guess each Loop."

"And how long do you expect *that* to last?!" Psy-Chick yelled, tears forming in her eyes. "How... How are you going to handle it when the Loops end... You don't have any powers... You can't Ascend when it's over... It... Would you really go along with it if it did happen?"

Chance looked his girlfriend in the eyes before getting up, walking over, and wrapping her in a hug. "Of course I would. You know that."

"Damn you Chance..." Psy-Chick cried into his shirt. "Why... Why do you have to die...? Why would you leave me alone...?"

"Hey," Chance chuckled. "You seemed to get together with my younger brother just fine afterwards. Looks like you have a thing for the Blevins boys..."

"I don't want your younger brother," Psy-Chick sniffed. "I don't care how charming he grows up to be. I want you. Why can't that happen?"

"Do you know why I came to Burlington Academy in the first place?" Chance asked instead of answering the question. "Why I trained so hard and faked having 'luck' as a superpower to get in? Because I wanted to help people. I wanted to be a Hero. I wanted that more than anything, and I still do."

"More than you want me?"

"Would you love me any other way?" Chance cupped her chin and looked her in the eyes. "If following my path means I have to die saving others, then that's what happens. And if I get an offer to keep going, keep helping people, after the end, even if it means always going where angels fear to tread, then you know I'll accept it."

"I know... It still hurts thinking about it though..."

"Hey, we don't know for certain what will happen from now on, much less when the Loops end. All we can do is enjoy the time we have together now. And who knows? That 'entry-level position' Helix is supposed to offer me comes with the opportunity for advancement. I could still end up Ascending at some point."

Psy-Chick choked out something between a sob and a laugh and hugged her boyfriend all the harder.

AdminSpace.1) This is shortly after the Loops began. Amusingly enough, Pastafanarianism was apparently founded shortly after Innortal started writing his original Loop fics.

AdminSpace.2) No, Aphrodite is not completely clueless around technology. She's just... vain and lazy most of the time.

AdminSpace.3) Nut runs the Star Wars branch. When she's not on the phone with her husband Geb acting like a lovesick schoolgirl.

AdminSpace.4) Marianne is also known as Lady Liberty. You might be familiar with the statue of her in New York. She is not in any way Little Red Riding Hood. She just wears one sometimes.

AdminSpace.5) Ares eventually succeeded in getting *I Want To Be The Guy* looping. Then he got assigned to attempt the even more problematic Dwarf Fortress. He might be having less success getting

it started, but reports indicate that he's certainly having more fun trying.

AdminSpace.6) The initial appearance of Tama, the stationmaster cat canonized as a Shinto goddess, in Yggdrasil. Poor Masakado.

AdminSpace.7) Hel is often described as half beautiful woman and half zombie. In the manner Two-Face is half-scarred. And, yes, this version has been dating Baldur for a long time as a shout-out to the myth where she refuses to release him back to the living. Seems that no one buys that they're dating though.

AdminSpace.8) My personal attempt to reconcile the mythology of Aglaea being Hephaestus's second wife after he divorced Aphrodite with the circumstances I've given him in the Loops. A few other myths about Heph and his various children were twisted about in the process.

AdminSpace.9) A few initial reactions to Tama. Madoka can be nonchalant here because she obviously already got the cuteness proximity out of her system.

AdminSpace.10) Tama takes over Half-Life. Gordon is never the same again.

AdminSpace.11) Fenrir packs some rather odd lunches.

AdminSpace.12) Why, yes, Zeus was responsible for throwing Tama into the deep end before she even got training. Or maybe it was the overeager Loop writers after her introduction. One of those.

AdminSpace.13) Tama likes trains. Oh so very much.

AdminSpace.14) Cat on your head is a legitimate excuse for not doing work. It just doesn't legitimately happen in most jobs.

AdminSpace.15) Fand is the Celtic Faerie Queen. She has a shipping problem.

AdminSpace.16) It's the thought that counts. Tama was thinking it was a nice present, and Skuld was thinking it was an apt punishment.

AdminSpace.17) Nut and Geb have eyes only for each other. And they haven't been allowed to see each other in longer than most mortals can comprehend. Plus, there are other complications with them sneaking off to be together than just Ra micromanaging their schedules to not be compatible. They don't give up though.

AdminSpace.18) Horusing Around.

AdminSpace.19) I believe it started about the time Eros got shoved off on him because neither Aphrodite or Ares could be bothered, and has only compounded since.

AdminSpace.20) Ah, weaponizing a house cat (goddess). I should really find an excuse to do that more often.

AdminSpace.21) Food fight!

AdminSpace.22) Daaaaaawwwww…

AdminSpace.23) You know, I'm starting to wonder just how much actual work gets done up there...

AdminSpace.24) Kitty therapy is best therapy.

AdminSpace.25) We will be seeing the effects of this in the Megaverse at some point, I'm sure.

AdminSpace.26) Madoka has to deal with a bit of hazing from her new co-workers from time to time. Some of it better-intentioned than others.

AdminSpace.27) That's an interesting question, actually...

Chance Fortune Bonus Loop) You know, *Chance Fortune Out of Time* had the feel like it was written specifically to close out a series

that didn't take off like the author had hoped. But I'm glad he put in the effort to do that much, even if it felt a little rushed in how he handled a few of his dangling plot threads from the first two books (even leaving a few poorly addressed or not at all). Not the best ending I've seen to a series, but it at least got a fairly solid one. Some series don't even get that much.

Last Loop of 2015 (Zerorock41)

Narrator X: **The Old West, several miles south of the town of Ol' Arcadia, the villainous Dastardly Sigma was up to his vile schemes. Accompanied by his tiny, somewhat racially insensitive flunky, Sombrero Chihuahua, Dastardly Sigma had begun tying the Mayor's Daughter to the railroad tracks.**

"Why are you doing this to me?" asked Palette, daughter of Mayor Signas.

Dastardly Sigma, twirling his evil moustache all the while, began monologuing.

"Nyahahaha! You see, my dear, I plan to buy your father's precious town. But as long as he had you, he wasn't gonna sell, since he wants you to inherit the town. Once you're good and dead, the man will be overcome with grief, and I'll be free to buy Ol' Arcadia! Isn't that right, Sombrero Chihuahua?"

Sombrero Chihuahua, finished tying the girl down, replied, "Si Señor Sigma."

"No one can stop me now! Nyahahahahaha!"

Meanwhile, on a nearby cliff, Sheriff Axl and his trusted steed, Zero, heard Dastardly Sigma's plan.

"Oh no!" yelled Axl, "Did you hear that, Zero? Dastardly Sigma and his insulting Mexican stereotype flunky have tied up the Mayor's daughter! We have to help her!"

Jumping on Zero's back, Sheriff Axl raised his guns to the sky.

"Hi ho, Zero! Away!"

Zero looked back at Axl, "You are enjoying this way too much."

"Come on, dude, don't break character now. We're getting to the fun part."

"What character do I have to break!? At least X has a speaking role, since he's the Narrator. I'm the damn horse!"

"Well, it's not my fault Yggdrasil likes to make fun of your *pony* tail."

Zero scowled (or the best equivalent a horse could do), "Listen you-"

Guys? That train is still heading for Palette. You might wanna go deal with that first.

Axl and Zero looked at each other, shrugged, and decided to ride off and stop Dastardly Sigma's evil plans.

-) Wild West X? Dastardly Sigma? *peers* Seems legit.

Mega Loops 24

Mega Loops 24 (AN: There seems to be some technical difficulties with the numbering…)

24.1 (OathToOblivion and cj304)

If there was one thing that Lan and Hub really hated when it came to baseline, it was Anetta and PlantMan's attack on the Beach Street Hospital. And it wasn't just because of Mamoru being in the middle of an operation, although that certainly contributed a lot. No, it was the fact that *they attacked a frickin' hospital!* If they didn't care about all the sick, injured, or really badly damaged people that they put in danger due to their stunt, then the Hikari Bros. were going to give them the same regard, or lack of as it were.

They had already visited Mamoru, and were now headed up to wait outside the Operation Room. They hadn't been able to convince anyone to let them guard the computer housing the TetraCode, so this was their only option. "How do you think it'll go?" Lan worried as they rode the elevator up.

"Assuming this is baseline, he'll be fine. We've been stocking up on fire Chips, so we should be able to blaze through in record time," Hub pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. I just can't help but worry," Lan admitted.

"Yeah," Hub sighed. The elevator dinged, and they arrived on the top floor of the hospital. Lan walked over to outside the Operation Room just as the light turned red. "You going to stay here the full three hours until the attack happens?" Hub questioned.

"What do you think?" Lan said rhetorically, waiting there.

About two hours into the wait, Lan was rummaging through his Folder to make sure that they were optimized for what was coming. "Hm...do you think I can get away with some of the later fire Chips like FireHit?" Lan questioned.

"Probably not. After all, Champy Viruses aren't a thing yet," Hub pointed out.

"Yeah, good point. Guess I should just stick with the things that have appeared," Lan decided, closing his Folder.

"Well, hey there, Lan!" a voice greeted. Lan blinked in surprise, turning to see who it was. And to his surprise, it was Tamako Shiraizumi, the Operator of and Mamoru's aunt. But what was she doing here? It did make sense for her to be here, being Mamoru's aunt and all, but she hadn't shown up in baseline.

"Oh, hey, Tamako!" Lan greeted back. "What are you doing here?" he questioned. He had a feeling he knew, but wanted to be sure.

"Oh, my nephew Mamoru's here for treatment. Which you should know about, Lan, since he's mentioned you a lot. Why else would *you* be here?" Tamako teased.

"Eheh. Yeah, I guess," Lan chuckled sheepishly.

"Still can't believe I managed to get time off to even come here. Usually this time of the month there's this one guy who's always pestering Sis and I about some random stupid thing. Was a no-show this time, thank goodness," Tamako commented. Lan blinked at that. Well that certainly explained that.

"So, while we're waiting for news, how about a Netbattle?" she offered. Lan thought about it. It was going to be about another hour until things started going ahead. There wasn't really anything else to do...

"Sure!"

Lan didn't usually feel sorry for a lot of the guys in WWW, 'cept Mr. Mach and Baryl. But as soon as the trouble started, Tamako had went ballistic in fury over the whole thing. Lan had already surreptitiously sent Hub to clear the emergency exit's system, so the first time Tamako and MetalMan saw what was going on in the Hospital's Network was in the basement.

"Grr...who's responsible for this?!" Tamako demanded.

"Well we're not going to find out like this! Let's clear this place out!" Lan pointed out.

"Right!"

In the HospitalComp, Hub turned to MetalMan. "Don't worry, MetalMan, I know exactly how to deal with these plants! I have a program that will convert fire-type Battle Chips into special flames that can burn them. And Lan has a lot of fire chips right now, enough for the two of us!" he declared.

"Well, it never hurts to be prepared, for when you might need an extra fire chip... or fifty," Lan grinned sheepishly.

Hub nodded. "Exactly! Now, if you can keep the viruses off my back, we can sweep the hospital from the ground up in no time-!" he attempted to say.

Tamako cut in at that. "What! That'll take too long! And fire's too risky! MetalMan! Charge through and cut down every plant in your way until you get to the programs running Mamoru's room!"

Lan blinked in surprise. They had already tried that before and and it had never worked. "Wait! Cut? How can he...?"

Tamako rolled her eyes. "With his buzzsaws! Duh! Go, MetalMan! I want to have this asshole's head removed from his body in ten minutes! We'll leave cleanup to these guys!" she declared.

MetalMan grinned a rather evil grin. "Right! HA! Silly plants! Trying to bar the way of someone who can produce an infinite number of saws! It's deforesting time!" he yelled, charging straight forward and tossing Metal Blades to and fro.

Hub blinked. "Well... that didn't go as planned. Kinda makes you wish they were here in baseline," he muttered to himself so Tamako couldn't hear.

"Now what am I gonna do with all these fire chips?" Lan complained. He wasn't usually one to go for the "Kill It With Fire" plan.

Hub thought about it to himself. "MetalMan's taking the direct route forward, but if we leave the plants in the side areas alone, they'll probably reinfect the whole system," he said seriously.

Lan nodded at that. "Right then, we'll follow their lead in this! Since every Virus in here seems to be plant-themed..." he mock-rationalized so as to not give away that they already knew this was going to happen.

"Right behind you, Lan! Style Change: HeatGuts Style!" Hub declared, summoning the code rings around him. Now in the red fire-based Style, he dashed after MetalMan, burning down the trees that the Breaking-element Navi had left in his tracks.

Lan grimaced. Not too long after they had jacked in, Anetta, PlantMan's Operator had walked in. The moment Tamako had learned that Anetta was the one responsible for the current condition of the hospital, she tossed her PET into Lan's hands and chased after Anetta, an almost demonic aura covering her. Lan was still

shuddering at that. But Hub and MetalMan had made it to the back of the area, where PlantMan was.

"Give it up, PlantMan!" Hub declared.

"Yeah! Your puny little plants aren't going to save you from the pummeling we're going to give you!" MetalMan yelled.

PlantMan gulped, but knew he had no choice but to engage them earlier than he had anticipated. "Don't underestimate the power of nature!" he exclaimed, launching into battle.

With the amount of fire and Metal Blades being tossed around, the battle was completely one-sided. Let's skip ahead.

As Hub and MetalMan stood over PlantMan's broken body, Hub couldn't help but comment about something. "You know, I was pretty impressed with your ferocity there. You must really care a lot about Mamoru yourself," he said.

MetalMan grinned. "Hell yeah! The little squirt's family! Course I care about him!" he boasted.

Hub grinned. "Well, anyone who loves their family that much is alright in my book!" he declared.

"You know what, MegaMan? You're alright!" MetalMan said, holding out his fist. Hub grinned some more and gave his companion a bro-fist, not even flinching at how much it hurt. Suddenly, a familiar feeling rose up in Hub. He only had time to blink before he flashed white and transformed into a familiar set of armor based off of MetalMan. Hub had entered MetalSoul!

MetalMan whistled. "Woo! Snazzy! You look like me now! Is that a Style Change?" he wondered.

"It's a DoubleSoul!" Lan said in surprise.

"Err...DoubleSoul?" MetalMan wondered in confusion.

"You know how most custom Navis have a special ability? Double Soul is MegaMan's, and lets him temporarily use the power of Navis he's synchronized with!" Lan declared with pride.

"Really? That's pretty cool," MetalMan complimented, before noticing a suspicious lack of plant. "Hey, where'd-?" he wondered, before noticing PlantMan making a break for Beach Street's Net Area, and most likely the Undernet. "Hey, he's getting away!" MetalMan said in alarm.

"Both of you, after him!" Lan ordered.

"Roger!" Hub declared, disengaging MetalSoul for the time being.

"Got it!" MetalMan complied, and the two of them immediately took off after PlantMan.

PlantMan ran for all he was worth, and he didn't dare stop.

He ran and he ran, passing Navis and Programs as he went, ignoring their cries as he bumped into them. He ran without rest, past viruses and data streams, power lines and flying messages. He didn't dare stop, not when he knew that if he did, his pursuers might catch up to him.

He kept running, even as his surroundings turned darker and gloomier as he crossed over into the Undernet.

Really, things had been going so well. That probably should have been his first clue that things would have turned out like this.

He and Anetta had just successfully hijacked the Hospital Server when the problems had started in the form of and his Operator being

on-hand. Dr. Wily had warned all of them about the Blue Bomber, whom had personally helped take apart the previous incarnation of the World Three, and had even deleted the Life Virus singlehandedly. His presence alone would have been cause for alarm, especially as he had already started interfering in their operations, but Mr. Match had given them a heads up about his fighting style, and had stressed MegaMan and his operator's naivety, so PlantMan had been reasonably sure that he and Anetta would have been able to beat him once the Server had been rendered under his control, and he could control the battlefield.

Too bad MegaMan hadn't been alone. As it had turned out, one of the Hospital Patients had had family visiting at the time, an aunt he believed, and she had taken exception to PlantMan putting her nephew's life in danger, and had promptly sent her Navi into the Hospital Comp to " *punch the face in* " of the one responsible. And was more than capable of doing so, being incredibly strong physically, a skilled battler, and capable of generating a seemingly *endless amount of* ***buzz saws*** .

PlantMan shivered just thinking about them, and the storm of blades that had almost torn him to shreds.

MetalMan alone would have been a problem. But MegaMan as well? They had made short work of his Data-Vines, between MetalMan's ***saws*** (*shudder*) and MegaMan's program generated flames, supplied by his operator from a seemingly endless amount of fire-chips that one would almost think he had stocked up on before-hand. The viruses hadn't even slowed them down; they had torn into them so quickly. MegaMan's skill had been *sublime* , he could admit to that. It was almost like he had been doing this for *years* he was so good.

And then they had been upon him. And not only had he had to worry about MetalMan punching his face in, or trying to cut him in half with his ***saws*** (*shudder*), but he'd had to deal with MegaMan *trying to light him on fire* . Because apparently MegaMan not only had an obscene amount of fire chips on hand, (*so many fire chips* ;

FireBlade, FireSword, HeatShot, HeatV, Salamander, FireRatton, FireDragon, RedWave, *and many more*) but he had a HeatGuts Style as well!

They had known that MegaMan possessed the capacity for Style Change! But FlashMan's Operator had reported that Megaman had possessed a WoodShield Style, not HeatGuts! (And he had apparently combined it with a WoodAura chip in his rather one-sided fight with FlashMan. Hah! Take that, FlashMan! Wood Power always beats Electric!) WoodShield he could have dealt with, if MegaMan had been foolish enough to try using a Style Change granted elemental affinity against a purely Elemental Customized Navi of the same element. But HeatGuts? That just wasn't *fair* !

What kind of Navi had complex enough programming to support *two* different Style Changes, let alone ones that opposed to each other? That kind of duality was almost *human* in its complexity!

Needless to say, the fight hadn't gone well for PlantMan. He had been lucky to escape with his life; they had beaten him so hard, and hit him with so many attacks, some of which would have been lethal had he not drawn energy from the GrassPanels MegaMan hadn't burnt to ashes. He'd barely held on to consciousness, faintly able to make out Anetta screaming as she was chased out of the Hospital by MetalMan's enraged Operator, and MegaMan and MetalMan taking a moment to exchange a fist-bump over his prone body, before MegaMan had been engulfed by a bright light and had seemingly evolved some kind of *super Style Change* that bared a resemblance to MetalMan.

He'd taken the moment that the two were distracted by MegaMan's Operator monologuing something about Double Souls to quietly get up and attempt an escape. Unfortunately, Anetta had dropped her PET, severing the connection, so he'd had to leave the server and find some place to hide until Anetta re-established contact when-well, *if* she got away.

Too bad they had spotted him, he'd almost managed it.

He hadn't wanted to find out what kind of damage MegaMan could dish out in his new form, as he suspected that he truly wouldn't survive another fight with him, and so he had abandoned all pretense of stealth and simply *run* before MetalMan and MegaMan could catch him.

And so now here he was, running through the Undernet, hoping that if he could get deep enough the denizens would become enough of a detriment to them that his pursuers would abandon the chase.

"Psst! Hey, over here!"

Startled, PlantMan stopped as he looked around for the source of the noise. Turning his head around wildly in his fear induced frenzy, he spotted a HeelNavi waving at him from around a far off corner.

"Hey, buddy, over here! Hurry!"

HeelNavi's had originally been designed as an off-the-shelf type of workforce Navi, meant for some of the more dangerous jobs that required durability and carried the risk of high-level virus attacks. They were resistant to Bugs and viral corruption, and their signals were rather faint, and could be modified to not disturb the more sensitive scanners they had been intended to maintenance, and they could put up a better fight than all but the more advanced NormalNavi brands. They were perfect for jobs that required the handling of Bug Frags, could herd and battle viruses with decent results, and were easy to upgrade. It was almost ridiculously obvious in hindsight that they would become the preferred brand of Navi to be used by criminals without any customizing skills.

Nowadays, you had to have serious self-confidence to use one in public without people thinking you were a thug of some kind, so there was a better than even chance that this Navi was a criminal of some kind. Meaning he might be a possible ally, something PlantMan sorely needed right now.

"Hurry up! You want them to catch you? I ain't sticking around to get caught in the crossfire like those other schmucks that hang around the area!"

Rushing around the corner, he saw the HeelNavi jogging in front of him, briefly turning around and motioning him to follow. Deciding that he didn't really have many options at the moment, PlantMan obliged, and followed the purple Navi for a good five minutes, running around corners and along corridors as they ventured deeper into the Undernet until his mysterious rescuer had deemed them safe enough to rest.

"Whew! I thought they were gonna follow us for sure! Guess it's a good thing they aren't familiar with this part of the Undernet!"

"Um, yes, thank you for that," PlantMan replied, now that he had a moment to talk. "I wasn't looking forward to those two finishing the job they started earlier. They almost did me in last time."

"Heh, I'll bet! But you had to expect a few PO'd goodie-goodie's showing up when you decided to take a Hospital hostage like that. "

PlantMan stilled, suddenly aware that he was deep in the Undernet, cut off from his NetOp, and in no condition to fight as he stared at the Navi that was apparently *very* well informed.

"You heard about that? So quickly?!"

The HeelNavi chuckled. "Relax man, I ain't here to fight. And yeah, it's the talk of the town in almost all the Under Squares around here. They say that gossip spreads faster than a PM, or something like that, and you're the latest, juiciest gossip for people like us."

PlantMan relaxed a bit. Yes, that made sense. It was only natural that actions of the World Three would be of interest to those that dwelled in the Undernet. Still, something the Navi said stuck with him.

"Then... what *are* you here for? Why did you help me?"

The HeelNavi chuckled again, not bothered the least by the subtle accusation.

"Sharp one. Good, the Boss'll be happy about that."

"Boss? You mean, your NetOp?"

"Nah, man. I mean the *Boss* ." The Navi put emphasis on the word, making the difference clear.

"The Boss is the one in charge of this part of the Undernet. Goes by the alias ' **No. 1** ', 'cause of the Ranking System that we use 'round here to measure who's top dogm" the purple Navi continued to explain. "Though sometimes the Boss goes by ' **S** ', if that makes things easier for you. The Boss heard about your little stunt, said it made an impression. Asked a few of us to keep an eye out for you when we heard you were heading in this direction, said that e'might appreciate a meeting with you. Y'know, to talk shop."

Plantman's thoughts raced. This... this was good. This was *really* good. The Undernet was a strange, and multi-faced beast, that grew larger the more private servers were linked onto it. It was divided into fifes, servers, and chaotic areas that occasionally connected to *elsewhere* , and even the World Three's staked area was only a fraction of the nebulous web. If he had made a favorable impression on one of the powers in the area, and they wanted to meet with him, then maybe the day wasn't a total loss. If he could convince this *Boss* , this " **S** ", that they would be better off throwing their support in with the World Three then Dr. Wily would probably even forgive the failure at the Hospital!

"I see. Well then, lead the way to this... **S** . It wouldn't do for me to ignore the help I've received because of them."

The HeelNavi cackled, slapping PlantMan on the back as he led him off deeper into the Undernet. "Thought you'd say that!"

Cautiously, PlantMan surveyed the area he'd been brought to. The HeelNavi had brought him deeper into the Undernet than he'd ever been, before showing him to a teleport platform that would take him the rest of the way. He'd then taken to guarding the entrance to the area, claiming that he wasn't important enough to listen in on their conversation.

This place... if felt *old* ; like it had been created *decades* ago. The coding was rustic, if functional, and the entire area seemed to be weathered, as though it had experienced the warping of the Undernet longer than most of the areas he was used to. The lighting was dim, and there was no background coding in the sky, as was the norm in the more recently created areas. Everything here was simple and straightforward. A single square area, connected to the teleport platform he'd come in from, leading to a set of stairs. Climbing the stairs, he saw what awaited him.

A single access point for a remote server.

PlantMan frowned. That access point was *ancient* , old enough that he would believe it if someone claimed it was a leftover from the Alpha or Beta Networks. And it was secure too. Just looking at the thing he could tell that he'd never be able to hack that, even if he had *days* to make the try.

Who **was** this **S** ?

And, more importantly, where were they? Were they in the server this connected to? Should he go in? *Could* he?

Taking a few cautious steps forward, PlantMan touched the Server Access Point and hesitantly tried to activate it.

BOOM

The force of the reaction as the Access Point rejected him was so violent that he flew back, all the way to the edge of the stairs, then

he tumbled down them, turning over and upside down until he came to rest a few feet away from the bottom steps.

"Sonofa-! What's the point of me coming here if I can't use it?!" PlantMan cursed. He normally wasn't a vulgar Navi, but he'd had a long day at this point, and now his head was spinning so much that the ground felt like it was shaking.

No... the ground *was* shaking, PlantMan realized. And so were the stairs, the walls of code that surrounded the area, even *the sky* was shaking. At this point PlantMan wouldn't be surprised if this entire section of the Undernet was shaking!

"It's... coming from the... Access Point?"

No, not from the Access Point, from whatever was *coming through it* !

Light, so bright, so sudden, hit him. Brighter than anything FlashMan had ever used, whiter, hotter, and infinitely more terrible. It felt like just this light, just this bright luminescence might burn him to ashes, it was so fierce.

He wasn't aware of how long it took his eyesight to return, but when it did he stared at the top of the stairs and saw ***her*** .

White legs that bore a resemblance to pants, and a black torso and arms, with golden and emerald accessories, long platinum strips of hair escaped from a helmet that rested atop a surprisingly human looking head, and two circular raiment's floated behind her.

This was **S** .

She, and it *was* a she, he realized, despite her slight frame being a few degrees away from being androgynous, *radiated* power. It poured off her not in waves, but in a constant rush of pressure that pushed down on him simply for being in her presence. A constant,

all-bearing power that was like the sky, so vast and enormous that it would swallow you whole without even noticing. It was like being at the depths of the ocean and being crushed by the *sheer weight* of its depth.

Not that PlantMan paid any conscious notice to that, as he was too busy staring at her chest.

That is not to say that he was ogling her. That was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment, to be honest. Even if he hadn't had a female Operator who had been sure to program a sense of respect for the female gender into him, and who had threatened to punish him severely should he ever go against that programming, the truth of the matter was that this Navi was so slight of frame that she might very easily be confused for a male.

No, he was staring at her chest, more specifically her stomach, because the belt attached to it bore a Navi Mark.

One he was sure he had seen on a wheelchair at the Hospital.

If PlantMan were human, his mouth would have been drier than the Sahara Desert.

As she walked down the stairs, the feeling of a BlackHole growing in his gut increased with every step down she took.

It felt like the stairs trembled with every step she took...

Oh wait, supremely powerful Navi, they probably were.

Briefly, PlantMan considered making a run for it, but even if the Teleport Platform was still working, and even if his ' *new friend* ' wasn't standing guard to make sure he didn't do just that, he *knew* , on an instinctive level that this Navi was only taking her time because she could end his existence any time she wanted. She was taking her time going down those steps because any speed he could

muster to try and retreat would be a snail's pace to her, and she would delete him if he tried.

And so he waited for his doom to arrive.

The Navi, **S** , finally reached the bottom of the stairs and came to a halt, standing but a few feet away from him and staring.

An eternity seemed to pass, during which PlantMan experienced the unique, and highly illogical, sensation of his life passing before his eyes, before the Navi spoke.

"So...you are He. The one who attacked the Hospital."

Her voice... it was soft, yet firm. It was mellow, like the wind across the waters of a pond. Yet PlantMan could tell... there was something lurking just below the surface. A Typhoon waiting to happen. A calamity kept in check by a soft shell.

All directed at him.

PlantMan swallowed, the action painful.

What a perfect end to an absolutely ***terrible*** day.

"Ordinarily," she began, seemingly content to draw it out. "I am bound by my duties. I may not venture out but to the deepest areas of the Undernet, and only to those areas close to the Uranet that I guard, for I must never stray too far from that which I am obligated to protect. Only in the direst of circumstances may I venture into the Network at large. Unfortunately..." And here her tone began to grow sharper.

"The protocols that I must adhere to would not consider a terrorist attack on a hospital to be dire enough to warrant my intervention. Especially when measures were already taken to counter such an

act." Her tone softened at the end, as she considered the reports she had received about the ones who had resolved the issue.

"I must thank them, for they not only protected Mamoru for me, but also did me a boon by *chasing you here* ."

Plantman nearly jumped out of his frame at the twist in her voice, *feeling* the malice directed at him, even as her voice remained at the same volume.

Mustering what remained of his courage, PlantMan dared to reply.

"So... so that you could have your-your underling bring me here."

"Yes. He is the current Ranked 5, and one of my subordinates. When I asked him to bring you here so that I might *deal with you myself* , he was kind enough to comply." Shadows seemed to frame her face as her voice once more twisted without rising in the slightest.

"Who... who *are* you?" PlantMan had to know, even if it was the *last thing* that he would know.

"Know that I am Serenade, the holder of the **Rank # 1** , the one titled Ruler of the Undernet since *its birth* , protector of the **Uranet** , and keeper of the **Forbidden Program** ." As the Navi, *Serenade* , introduced herself, her form seemed to glow brighter and brighter with an internal luminescence, and the pressure around her grew and grew until he was fairly sure he saw the ground beneath her feet beginning to *melt* .

PlantMan considered the Navi in front of him, felt the Power coming off of her form, recalled the menace in her words, and tried not to think about what a ruler of the Undernet could do to him if they were angry enough. He took all of this in, and realized that his life was now probably to be measured in *seconds* . Still, there was only one thing left to try.

"If I said I was sorry, begged forgiveness, and turned myself in... would you let me live?"

Serenade *smiled* , a tiny little thing that gently upturned her lips without stretching her cheeks.

PlantMan shivered, trembling in fear, even as he forced himself to *look* at that smile and *remember* it. To remember the last thing that he would ever see.

There was no compassion in that smile at all.

" ***No*** ."

The world flashed white, the ground trembled, the very Undernet *shook* , and *rumbled.* Heat blasted across the connected networks, and a wave of sound that deafened all in its wake and knocked them aside, so terrible was its pressure, followed after it.

The weaker denizens of the Undernet felt their knees grow weak and collapsed, the stronger ones felt *terror* drown their souls as they trembled, and the oldest and vilest beings that made their home in the cracks of the ever growing hell felt *fear* for the first time in so long. All save one Navi, cloaked in a ragged brown cape, who *laughed* at the power that rolled across the Net, a sharp-toothed and blood-thirsty smile on his face, and one who was clothed in blue, who stared off in the direction he could feel the power from, before grimly nodding and turning to help his companion to his feet.

Of where PlantMan had been, there was simply an absence of space, as he, and everything around him, had been reduced to less than ashes...

Anetta was eventually arrested, but only after the police pulled an enraged Tamako off of her. Eventually she was rescued from prison by her World Three comrades, but when she connected to the Network to look for PlantMan, or failing that his Ghost-Data, she

couldn't find a single trace of him, no matter how hard she looked. She was forced to use a backup copy to restore him, though his copy couldn't for the life of him explain why he developed an irrational fear of wheelchairs.

24.2 (Sirkaid)

"I'm picking up a large energy buildup in the centre of the room, Megaman! Be careful!" Roll said through the radio.

Megaman readied his buster cannon and waited. The cylinder in the middle of the room had lit up when he entered but hadn't had any further reaction.

"I don't think it's a Reaverbot, Roll, Megaman replied. "I'm going to give it a closer look."

Megaman slowly approached the cylinder. Apart from being able to hear a quiet hum, nothing changed.

"It looks like some kind of metal and glass pod. It's about the size of a tall man, and... Woah!"

Megaman's report ended when he touched the pod and a translucent blue man appeared inside. He was wearing a lab coat and had a large bushy beard. "Hello, X, I... Wait. You're not X," the man said.

Something about that name seemed oddly familiar, but Megaman shook his head. "No sir, my name's Megaman Volnutt."

The man closed his eyes and muttered something that Megaman couldn't quite catch. What was a 'Variant Loop' anyway?

"Right," the man declared, "my name is Dr. Thomas Light. I'm a brain upload of the original Dr. Light, doubtlessly long since dead, and he

put me in here so that I could present our youngest son with upgrades long after his death. Unfortunately it looks like he never found this capsule. If you would be so kind as to escort your mechanic to me, I could walk her through the process of detaching my capsule from the floor and moving it to your ship. I'd love to see how the world has changed since original-me's death. If you'll have me, of course."

"Roll, did you catch that?" Megaman asked.

"OhmygodareallifeAncientscientistthisisamazing- Megaman, I'm coming down! Meet me at the elevator!"

Dr. Light chuckled. "I suppose that answers that. Go ahead, it isn't polite to keep a lady waiting."

24.3

"Well, this is a strange variant, nya," Roll observed as she Awoke. And it was. Apparently at some point in history, it became common for humans to possess varying degrees of animal traits. Which explained why she was, once again, a catgirl.

"Still have the verbal tic?" Rock grinned in amusement.

"Nyah... Go chase a car, Rock Rush Light," Roll Tango Light hissed.

"Woof, woof, sis," her brother laughed teasingly.

"I have claws you know."

"Woof. Woof. Kitty. Cat."

Dr. Light was awoken by the sounds of his robot children chasing each other around the lab a few seconds before his radio alarm went

off, playing an old favorite by Queen.

Are you gonna take me home tonight?

Ah down beside that red firelight.

Are you gonna let it all hang out?

Rat bottomed girls,

You make the rockin' world go round.

24.4 (Scorntex)

"Anything?" Roll asked. Rock looked at the crumpled pile, nudging aside a few pieces of armour, and winced at the sight.

"Yes," he said quietly, picking up a small item. It was half an IC chip.

Roll's expression remained neutral, and Rock sighed. He'd been hoping, even after seeing the poor robot's head was shattered, that there would've been something he could've done.

"Sorry dad," he said, through the communicator, "but Bass has made sure we can't rebuild Dubstep Man."

REATTEMPTING ACTIVATION OF LOOPER CANDIDATE 'BASS'...

ERROR: ACTIVATION FAILED.

BRANCH DESIGNATED 'MEGA' CURRENTLY UNABLE TO SUPPORT CANDIDATE 'BASS' AS LOOPER.

COMPILING LOOP MEMORY DATA FOR LATER ATTEMPT…

24.5 (Scorntex)

"Hey, X?"

"Yeah, Z?" X tapped the side of his helmet, hoping it would deal with the odd wobble on the line.

No such luck, alas. Though given the size of the ruins they were exploring, any coherent signal in there was frankly a miracle.

"You know how we thought some of the defence mechanisms down here still worked?"

There was the sound of gunfire.

"Let me guess," X said, now wearily looking about in the gloom, "you found something."

There was what sounded like a mechanical yelp. "Oh, I found *something.* "

After a few seconds whatever had been occupying Zero's attention had been dealt with. "Incidentally, I'm under attack. Well, I say "attack". Guess your siblings forgot to break some of Wily's old toys last time around."

Great, so it was the remains of a Wily Castle. And some (though less than there were five minutes ago, at least) of the things down here were sti–

Something exploded past X's head. As if on cue, several lights flickered into action, revealing what could have been almost like a house of horrors.

If they were littered with rubble, the remains of... well, at the moment, the best X could go on was "things", and traps.

Also, a battered, one-eyed thing was aiming a weapon at his head. A Joe, from the looks of it.

Frankly, it was amazing the thing was still functioning. Most of its head was missing.

Meanwhile, over the sound of the comm., Zero could be heard chuckling as several more things found themselves falling victim to Zero's blade (and need to vent his boredom).

Aiming at the Joe, and ignoring the sound of several more things in the distance turning on, X winced.

This had been *supposed* to be a boring walk through some ruins, just for Doctor Cain.

24.6

Quint looked down at the garment he was expected to wear as part of an 'infiltration' mission to the convent of the Sisters of Perpetual Weepiness. A Loop where everything was grayscale was one thing. Being a police lieutenant was another. Dealing with the local Anchor's (supposedly) Unawake best friend and his antics on the other hand...

"Nigel," he looked up from the outfit and stared the man in the eyes as he held an identical such garment, "is the desire to shoot Harry an uncommon one?"

"Not really," Nigel Grouse answered with a sigh. "Lieutenant Foster, the man you're replacing, has expressed such a desire on numerous occasions each Loop, Awake or otherwise. Still, he manages to suppress it well enough. In fact, if you can manage to go the whole Loop without actually attacking Harry, then you're eligible for an achievement pin."

"Hmm..." Quint grunted noncommittally as he looked over to the man who was supposedly the 'brains' of this operation, despite none being evident. Harry Hunsacker, 'world famous detective' and aspiring actor... ' *I swear, the man could starve a zombie simply by being within fifty feet of it...'*

"This is gonna be great, you guys! A real secret mission!" Harry beamed where he was dressed as a priest of the catholic church as part of his cover. "Come on, get into costume! You don't want to blow the mission, do you?"

Sighing heavily, Quint gave in and put on the nun's habit.

24.7

Cthulhu chuckled to himself as he snuck up on the blue and red forms silently, looming over them and casting his shadow. They noticed the shadow and turned to meet him, gazing upon his carefully crafted and geometrically impossible avatar.

"f ***h*** **T** a *g* N!" he bellowed at them.

"Devil series?" the blue one asked the red calmly.

"Don't think so, X" the red answered, shaking his head and sending the long blond ponytail hanging out of his helmet swishing. "I'm not getting any of Wily's transponder signals from it."

"y **O** u " *r* E *S* u **P** P *o* s E d **t** O *B* 3 **s** C r eA **M** 1 *n* g n 0w..."

"Not feeling it," the one called X shrugged. "How about you, Zero?"

"The angles may be giving my processors conniptions," the one called Zero folded his arms, "but Weil's still got this guy beat hands down."

" *i* w **I** l l **d** E *S* **t** r 0 Y *y* O **U** r m **I** *n* dS!1!"

"That sounded hostile," the one called X blinked, one arm forming into a cannon.

"That it did," the one called Zero nodded, pulling out an object that ignited into some form of energy blade.

"wH *a* t **d** 0 y *O* U t H i **n** K *t* O... o **W** !1! w **A** i– *a* R g *H* ! **n** 0 *T* t H *3* **f** Ac *E* !"

24.1) Plantman. exe's terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. As promised.

24.2) On some island somewhere, there's a guy who goes by Captain Archer that is enjoying a quiet Loop to fish and relax. Upstairs in his office, Hephaestus is banging his head on his desk over the fact that this *isn't supposed to be happening yet* .

24.3) This Loop they're fighting like cats and do–*is shot*

24.4) In Archie comic Short Circuits, Bass drops *you* !

24.5) You know, I have to wonder. For every Skull Fortress found in the classic series, how many escaped detection?

24.6) I live in Dallas and we have these amazing and hilarious local plays every year around my birthday called 'living black and white' that are spoofs on 30s and 40s detective shows. This year's was new, seventeenth written in the series (they don't go in chronological order), called *Death Is A Bad Habit* .

24.7) You know, you'd think the guys over at Shoggoth-chan would learn...